

The **W**eird **A** Ellen Prom **Queen** Trendsetters

By *Elizabeth* SHANNON

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

Let me just say that this will go in my anthology of plays about hair even though it's not really about hair – it rarely is. THE WEIRD ELLEN PROM QUEEN TRENDSETTERS is, however, set in a salon where Wendy's getting her hair done for prom (this high school does it early) accompanied by her close friend, Francesca. Then there's Ash, the friendly and talkative hairdresser who opens up a conversation that's bigger than any hairstyle. Elizabeth Shannon's coming of age prom drama is a satisfying short play that gets it right in so many ways, that in the name of space, I'll only mention a couple of them. First off, it's got dialogue with teenagers who sound like real teenagers. Not only is this hard to do unless you are, in fact, a teenager (and even then), but here it feels effortless. It also has a terrific coming out speech. While there's nothing unusual about a "coming out" monologue in which a character expands the moment to proclaim their truth or reveal a secret, in this case it's not as much about the secret itself as an examination of the need for secrecy at all, i.e., the ever-shifting barometer of how much to tell who and when. It's also about coming out.

Here's a snippet from Wendy's speech:

Like, I want gay people to know I'm queer but not straight people.

Plus a bit of dialogue to get the party rolling:

ASH
And does this princess have a prince?

WENDY
What?

ASH
A prince. A boyfriend, a date to the dance.

WENDY
Um...

ASH

Or just going with friends?

WENDY

Yeah. Friends.

THE WEIRD ELLEN PROM QUEEN TRENDSETTERS

CHARACTERS:

WENDY - High school senior. A private person who is a bit awkward.

ASH - Hairdresser. Bubbly and talkative, but has a good heart. You know the type.

FRANCESCA - High school senior. Sweet and charismatic.

SETTING:

Mabel's Salon. Spring. Present day.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

There are a few descriptions of hairstyles. These can be changed to accommodate different hair types if needed.

Diverse casting is encouraged.

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

(Lights up on a hair salon. There is a hair salon chair facing the audience, with WENDY sitting in it. ASH is behind her, looking at her hair in the imaginary mirror in front of her (where the audience is)).

ASH
(referencing WENDY's hair)

Wow! It's so long now.

WENDY
Yeah, it's been a while.

ASH
More than half a year, right?

WENDY
Ten months. The last time I came in it was June, right before my vacation to New Orleans, and I was so tired of having long hair. It gets way too hot in the summer.

ASH
I have the same problem. So are we cutting it today, then?

WENDY
Nah, just, um, styling it.

ASH
Oh.

WENDY
Yeah.

ASH
Well, I suppose that's good. Long hair is always more fun to style, there's so much more you can do!

WENDY
(chuckles awkwardly)
Yeah.

ASH

So what're you thinking?

WENDY

I don't know.

ASH

Why are you getting it done? A wedding, graduation, family portraits, maybe?

WENDY

I don't graduate until June. It's for prom, actually.

ASH

Oh! Prom. Silly me, I don't know how I could forget. I guess I thought it was later.

WENDY

My school always has it before any other school in the district.

ASH

Gotcha.

(pause)

Curls? Braids? Braids and curls? Or we could straighten it. And I have these sparkly clips... any of those sound good?

(WENDY shrugs her shoulders.)

ASH

Well. Um. Do you have a dress that I could see a picture of? Maybe then I can get a better idea of your vibe...

(WENDY nods and pulls out her phone. She finds a picture and gives her phone to ASH.)

WENDY

You can swipe. There are more pics.

(pause, as ASH is swiping)

I'm not trying to be difficult. For real. I just... it's kinda overwhelming.

ASH

If you don't want anything done, that's okay. Sometimes some girls' moms force them to come in...

WENDY

No, no, it's not that. I want it.

(ASH nods and hands WENDY's phone back to her.)

ASH

It's a very pretty dress.

WENDY

Thanks.

ASH

I love that detailing, the lace and everything. And the color? Wow. Lavender is one of my favorites.

WENDY

(with a small smile)

Me too. Obviously.

ASH

I think I want to do a sort of princess look. Is that okay with you?

WENDY

Yeah.

ASH

A half up, half down kinda thing. I can do some braids, but keep them loose, pull some hair strands out... you'll look stunning.

WENDY

Cool.

ASH

I mean, you already look stunning, but -

WENDY

I get what you mean.

(pause)

Thanks.

ASH

Of course. It's what I'm here for.

(ASH starts braiding WENDY's hair.
ASH doesn't like the silence.)

ASH

So where's the venue?

WENDY

Some hotel downtown. I forget which one exactly.

ASH

And are you going with friends?

WENDY

A few, yeah.

ASH

What do their dresses look like?

WENDY

Um, Kaylee has a dark blue halter one, and Raymond's is a light pink, and Maria's is a dark red with this cool mermaid cut, and Francesca's is this cool, shimmery black material -

ASH

And does this princess have a prince?

WENDY

What?

ASH

A prince. A boyfriend, a date to the dance.

WENDY

Um...

ASH

Or just going with friends?

WENDY

Yeah. Friends.

ASH

And the girl you came in with?

WENDY

What, what about her?

ASH

Is she one of the friends?

WENDY

Oh. Yeah. That's Francesca.

ASH

You two seem awfully close.

WENDY

We are. She's my... like my best friend ever. We do everything together.

ASH

Clearly. I mean, that's good. We all need a girlfriend we can count on, right?

WENDY

I -

ASH

I love all my girlfriends. I don't know what I would do without them!

WENDY

Haha. Yup.

ASH

Have fun with your friends this year. Maybe next year you'll have a date. But honestly, between you and me, it's usually even more fun with just friends.

WENDY

Yeah.

ASH

And maybe you'll get asked to dance by a cute boy! Wait, do they even do that anymore?

WENDY

I don't know, I've never / been to prom -

ASH

Duh, you've never been, what am I thinking?!

WENDY

You're all good.

ASH

I just don't want you to feel down cause you don't have a date.

WENDY

(a little too firmly)

Trust me, I don't.

(off ASH's look)

I just... um... not super boy crazy, I guess.

ASH

I get it. Focused on school?

WENDY

... Yeah.

ASH

Good thing you've got that balance. Plenty of time for boys later in life.

WENDY

Yup.

(Awkward silence. FRANCESCA enters.)

FRANCESCA

Hey, babe, you gave me your phone, your mom's calling..

(FRANCESCA hands WENDY her phone.)

WENDY

Can I take this? Outside?

ASH
Yeah, just be careful of the hair.

WENDY
Thanks so much.

(WENDY exits.)

FRANCESCA
Sorry about that.

ASH
It's okay -

FRANCESCA
Her mom just doesn't know she's here right now -

ASH
Why wouldn't she know?

FRANCESCA
I don't get it. Wendy just didn't want to tell her. Which I thought was weird, because, like, why would her mom care, you know? But whatever. There are a lot of things she doesn't tell her mom.

ASH
I hope my little girl doesn't grow up to be like that.

FRANCESCA
What do you mean, "like that"?

ASH
Oh, sorry, that came out wrong. Wendy is wonderful. I just want my kids to always trust me enough to communicate.

FRANCESCA

Right.

ASH

I'm sorry if that was rude.

FRANCESCA

No, you're good. I mean, that's what every parent wants, right?

ASH

Exactly.

(There is an awkward silence.)

ASH

Well, she's lucky to have a friend like you.

(FRANCESCA laughs.)

ASH

Did I...?

FRANCESCA

Just, the way you said friend. Like we're two gal pals. Just straight besties.

(ASH is confused.)

FRANCESCA

Shit. She didn't -

ASH

You aren't friends?

FRANCESCA

Um, we are, but we're also... she's my date to prom and stuff, and... we're dating.

ASH

Oh.

(pause)

Um, how long have / you been together?

FRANCESCA

She didn't tell you? Oh, sorry. Um, just a little bit more than a month.

ASH

Wow.

FRANCESCA

Yeah. It's nice.

ASH

That's... I mean that's totally cool with me, I'm not... I mean, I support it, I just feel bad now with all my talk about her getting a boyfriend -

FRANCESCA

I really shouldn't have said anything. I just assumed you knew.

(Awkward silence. WENDY enters and gives her phone back to FRANCESCA.)

FRANCESCA

Everything good?

WENDY

Yeah, thanks.

ASH

So, ready to get back into it? I had a lovely chat with your girlfriend!

WENDY

She's not... we aren't -

(WENDY looks at FRANCESCA, who mouths "sorry". ASH gives WENDY an encouraging look.)

WENDY

Uh. Yeah. We can...

ASH

(sensing some tension between WENDY and FRANCESCA)

You know, I have these sparkly clips that I really think would tie the whole look together. But they're in the back, so let me just...

(ASH excuses herself and exits.)

FRANCESCA

I'm really sorry I thought she knew I just figured since you brought me here and didn't tell me not to be quiet about it and we were holding hands at the front desk when we were checking in and -

WENDY

It's fine.

FRANCESCA

Really? You're not mad?

WENDY

Why would I be mad?

FRANCESCA

I... I kinda outed you.

WENDY

Not on purpose.

FRANCESCA

But still.

WENDY

I'm fine with her knowing.

FRANCESCA

But you didn't tell her. She mentioned how she talked to you about getting a boyfriend...

WENDY

I just said I was going to the dance with friends.

FRANCESCA

But why didn't you feel comfortable enough to tell her yourself yet you aren't mad at me for accidentally saying it?

WENDY

I know your intentions were good.

FRANCESCA

That doesn't make it okay!

WENDY

Not always, no. But this time, it is.

(pause)

I'm private about who I date. Even when I date guys. Like when I was dating Jake, he got so mad cause I didn't wanna tell people...

and then adding the homophobia thing to it, it's just another layer.

(pause)

It seems like such a personal part of me. That not everyone deserves to know. Er, deserves is the wrong word... it just doesn't affect them. It's like how I've never liked small talk. I'm happy to hear about Ash's life, if she wants to share (which she always does), but I don't really want to get into mine.

(FRANCESCA nods.)

WENDY

Coming out, is fucking *annoying*. I don't care what everyone else says. It isn't a weight off my shoulders, it isn't a moment of pride, it's just a nuisance. And it never ends! It never fuckin ends. I think the heteros think that it does. Like you come out once, and that's it. You're good. But no. You come out to your friends. Your family, your extended family. Maybe your classmates or your teachers. Your coworkers, if you feel safe enough to. And it doesn't even stop there! You go into a... what are they called, uh, a *flower shop*, and the man behind the counter asks if these are for your boyfriend, and it's this moment of panic, like, do I say yes just to make my life easy? But that would be lying. And I'm fine lying about it for myself, but then am I hurting my girlfriend by lying about it? Cause I don't want her to think that I don't love her or aren't proud of her or aren't committed to the relationship. But then what does the florist guy do if I tell him the truth? What if he glares at me or makes some Jesus comment or even refuses me service? But then what if it turns out he's gay and I don't say anything and I miss this moment of potential connection? Like, I want gay people to know I'm queer but not straight people. And moments like this... getting corsages, getting my hair done, getting nominated from prom queen with you and having to be this weird Ellen lesbian prom queen trendsetter? (And I don't even like Ellen! Or just in public, having to calculate if it's safe to hold your hand or if I'm gonna be like those girls in London who got beat up cause they were together. And then you would get hurt! Which is like the worst thing ever that could happen. It's just... it never ends. And it can be exhausting. And this was supposed to be simple and fun and now I'm fucking freaking out for no reason in a salon even though I don't care that Ash knows!

(Long moment of silence.)

WENDY

Sorry.

FRANCESCA

You have nothing to apologize for.

WENDY

It just... it can be a lot.

FRANCESCA

I'm sorry if I made it worse.

WENDY

You didn't.

(pause)

Do you not... you don't get that same frustration, that same exhaustion?

(FRANCESCA shrugs her shoulders.)

WENDY

I feel like a fake. People tell me I helped them come out, I helped them realize their sexuality, I educated them... yet I'm too scared to tell people, too... not ashamed, but... not wanting to stand out. I don't want to worry about telling people or people finding out, or... and I still get anxious about it all. How am I supposed to be a role model if my fight-or-flight still kicks in when people realize I'm not straight?

FRANCESCA

Heteronormativity is a bitch.

WENDY

(with a small laugh)

You can say that again.

(pause)

I'm glad you're here.

FRANCESCA

Really?

WENDY

One hundred percent.

FRANCESCA

You look really beautiful. I love the hair.

WENDY

Thanks :)

FRANCESCA

I'm excited for prom.

WENDY

Me too.

FRANCESCA

You think we'll win prom queens?

WENDY

Maybe. I hope so. I'm banking on the Straight People Guilt™ .

(FRANCESCA and WENDY laugh. ASH enters, with the hair clips.)

ASH

Sorry, it took me a while to find them.

WENDY

No problem.

ASH

Let's finish up so you two can start getting ready for your big night!

(WENDY sits back down in the chair.)

ASH

You'll have to show me pictures next time you come in.

WENDY

I will.

And Francesca, do you have a picture of your dress? I'd love to see it.

(FRANCESCA pulls out her phone and finds a picture before handing it to ASH. ASH takes it and looks.)

ASH

Oh my goodness it's absolutely stunning! You two are going to look so gorgeous together.

WENDY + FRANCESCA

Thank you.

(Moment of silence. ASH continues working on WENDY's hair. WENDY and FRANCESCA share an understanding glance. Lights slowly fade. BLACKOUT.)

END OF PLAY

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *Elizabeth Shannon loves combining social activism and progress in her work and makes it a priority whenever she writes. She wanted to explore just a*

few of the many nuanced feelings members of the LGBTQ+ community go through, even in small, everyday events, while also spreading a message of hope and positivity. She also wanted to pay tribute to her friend, Wendy. Lynn Nottage and Paula Vogel are two of her biggest dramatic and literary inspirations and influences. Libby Carr, Alex Lin, and Madhuri Shekar are some of her stylistic influences as well.

AUTHOR BIO: Elizabeth Shannon is a playwright from Frederick, MD. She was an apprentice at the Maryland Ensemble Theatre (MET) for two years, as well as a second year member of the Theatre Focus in the Academy for the Fine Arts. She will be attending college in the fall at Marymount Manhattan College to get her BFA in acting. Her play, “Smoke”, was performed virtually with University of Texas El Paso’s student organization Ensemble. Her play, “What Are You Hiding?”, which she co-wrote with Morgan Southwell, was a winner of Baltimore Centerstage’s Young Playwright’s Festival, and a finalist in The Secret Theatre’s Act One: One Act Festival, as well as part of the live-streamed reading series, “The Future Was Now”, by Quarantined Theatre Company, which can be found on YouTube. Her play, “Nuclear”, was a winner of The Blank Theatre’s 28th Annual Young Playwrights Festival and received an honorable mention in the 43rd Annual Marilyn Bianchi Kids’ Playwriting Festival with Dobama Theatre. Her play, “Mama Buswick is Dead” is a winner of The Blank Theatre’s 29th Annual Young Playwrights Festival, and her play, “Nancy” was a semifinalist. “Nancy” is also currently being performed with the New Voices program at Olney Theatre. Her play “To Be Determined”, received a staged reading with Rapid Lemon Productions’ Variations on Vision and is the high school winner for the Northern Arizona Playwriting Showcase. Her play, “Loaded Language”, was a winner of #Enough: Plays to End Gun Violence, a project comprised of 7 plays by young women addressing gun violence. Its world premiere was with South Coast Repertory and is published in an anthology with Playscripts.