



Busch, Charles (b. 1954)

by David J. Eshelman

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2007 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Considered by many to be a successor to such famous drag performers as Charles Ludlam and Charles Pierce, actor-writer Charles Busch has distinguished himself through his virtuoso performances of "grande dame" characters and through his writing of dramatic vehicles for these roles.

There is disagreement about how Busch's work should be interpreted. Busch represents a new kind of drag performer, similar to Harvey Fierstein, because ever-increasing popular attention has moved his work from the margins nearer to the mainstream. In the eyes of some critics and scholars, his work's popular appeal indicates a lessening of the subversive power of drag.

However, theater scholar Richard Niles claims that, though his goal is to entertain, Busch nonetheless makes a subtle commentary on gender through his comic heroines. Niles argues that the power of Busch's work lies in its ability to speak to a collective camp understanding shared among his gay audiences---an understanding based largely on an appreciation of histrionic actresses from the past.

Busch's artistic endeavors are wide-ranging and include theater, film, and television. His writing accomplishments include *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* (2000), a dark comedy about a New York City housewife with artistic pretensions, which ran on Broadway for 777 performances and earned Busch a Tony nomination. He also wrote the book for the U.S. version of *Taboo* (2003), a musical about rocker Boy George and fashion designer Leigh Bowery, for which Boy George wrote the music. Although it was panned by critics, this show received huge press coverage, in large part because of the connection with Rosie O'Donnell, who produced it.

As an actor, Busch won a Best Performance Award from the Sundance Film Festival for playing the female lead in *Die Mommie Die* (2003), for which he also wrote the screenplay. Perhaps Busch gained his widest exposure, though, through his recurring role as a cross-dressing prison inmate on the HBO drama, *Oz*, during the 1999-2000 season.

Born August 23, 1954, Busch was raised in the same upwardly-mobile suburban New York Jewish culture that nourished *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*. His mother died when he was seven years old and he was raised by his aunt Lillian, whom he has described as a cross between Auntie Mame and the Miracle Worker. She encouraged his artistic ambitions and helped support him until he was able to earn a living in the theater.

Busch attended Northwestern University, where he earned a B.F.A. in drama. At Northwestern, he felt out of place and did not do much performing there --perhaps because he was shy and his somewhat feminine appearance made him difficult to cast.

This accident of physique helps to explain the directions taken in Busch's work. As Niles observes, Busch's drag performances are not based on a humorous contrast between performer and role, as with more portly artists such as Harvey Fierstein and Divine. Rather, his performance of woman is largely believable.

This point is stressed in the notes that Busch writes to accompany his published plays: he insists that a biological woman could easily play the diva roles that he created in such plays as *Psycho Beach Party* (1987) and *The Lady in Question* (1989). The result is that Busch's roles draw attention to the artificiality of gender roles in general, and femininity in particular, from within rather than from without. Busch's committed portrayals of 1940s and 1950s actresses is such that audiences do not laugh so much at the fact that Busch plays a woman; instead, audiences get a wry look through Busch at the roles played by these divas in their professional lives.

After several years of attempting a solo act with very limited success, Busch blossomed as a writer/performer when he established the group, Theatre-in-Limbo, in 1984. As Busch writes, he "started out as a performer who needed lines to say and, through necessity, grew to be a writer." His first plays were written for a very minimalist theater, with no sets, no pay for actors, and costumes drawn from the actors' own wardrobes.

Theatre-in-Limbo's initial success came from *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* (1984), a short play about two undead women--one played by Busch--who chase each other through history as stage performers. This play started in the Limbo Lounge, an art-gallery/bar, but moved Off-Broadway in 1985, where it had one of the longest runs in Off-Broadway history.

After *Vampire Lesbians*, Busch wrote *Psycho Beach Party*, in which he played a Gidget-like heroine with libidinous alter-egos. This success was followed by *The Lady in Question*, in which he played the title role, a burlesque-piano-player-turned-concert-pianist who stands up to the Nazis.

Busch's next noteworthy play was *Red Scare on Sunset* (1991), in which he starred as a 1950s actress surrounded by communists, who must name names as her moral duty. All three of these plays are heavily influenced by Busch's love of old cinema--especially actresses such as Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, and Susan Hayward.

The framing of Theatre-in-Limbo productions highlighted the dynamics of camp. The performers presented the conceit that theirs was an old-fashioned theater company---similar to those that comprised the popular French theater of the late nineteenth century. In this company, Busch was "the leading lady, a Sarah Bernhardt of Avenue C." The effect for the audience, writes Busch, is that they were watching "Charles Busch *playing* an aging actress *playing*" a role in that evening's play. According to Richard Niles (building on the work of Elin Diamond), this endless presentation of artifice creates "historicized" performances: because audiences are presented with performances marked as performances, they are better able to question the evolving relationship of gender and sexuality to culture.

Since Theatre-in-Limbo broke up in 1991, Busch has worked in numerous films, has written new scripts for old musicals, and has created a solo show, *Flipping My Wig* (1996)---an evening of songs and short pieces in which he creates a variety of Hollywood-like heroines. In 2006, his play *Our Leading Lady* was produced by the Manhattan Theatre Club. In the same year, he made his debut as a film director with *A Very Serious Person*.

His greatest impact in the New York theater world, however, has come from *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*. This effort is unlike Busch's earlier work in that he does not appear in the play. Its popularity causes even Busch himself to get defensive. Responding to comments about his new status as "mainstream," Busch writes, "I always thought I was mainstream."

This ambivalence about Busch is felt more widely within queer theater circles. Although his later work has served to bring him greater attention in the wider theater world, many aficionados of queer theater believe that his work is most important when Busch is starring as the diva.

Busch is the subject of the 2005 documentary *The Lady in Question Is Charles Busch* directed by John Catania and Charles Ignacio. He lives in New York with his longtime partner, writer Eric Myers.

Bibliography

Busch, Charles. *Charles Busch: The Official Website*. (2007): <http://www.charlesbusch.com/>

_____. *Four Plays*. Garden City, N. Y.: Fireside Theatre, 1989.

_____. *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife and Other Plays*. New York: Grove, 2001.

"The Charles Busch Picture Pages." SuperiorPics.com (2007): http://www.superiorpics.com/charles_busch/

Keehnen, Owen. "The Sweetest Taboo: An Interview with Charles Busch." www.glbtc.com (2003): <http://www.glbtc.com/sfeatures/interviewcharlesbusch.html>

Niles, Richard. "Wigs, Laughter, and Subversion: Charles Busch and Strategies of Drag Performance." *The Drag Queen Anthology*. Steven P. Schacht and Lisa Underwood, eds. New York: Harrington Park, 2004. 35-53.

Shewey, Don. "A Droll Dramatist Who Is Also A Diva Moves Up a Notch." *New York Times* (October 29, 2000): <http://www.charlesbusch.com/Interview%20-%20The%20NY%20Times%20October%202000.htm>

About the Author

David J. Eshelman is Assistant Professor of Speech at Arkansas Tech University. He is a playwright, whose gender-challenging work includes *The Witches' Quorum*, "The Silent Adventures of Maria and Josie," and *A Taste of Buffalo*. His research interests include the representation of gender and the feminist translation of plays from Quebec. Eshelman holds an M.F.A. from the University of Texas at Austin Michener Center for Writers and a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia.