



Eichelberger, Ethyl (1945-1990)

by Joe E. Jeffreys

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An influential figure in experimental theater, writer and drag performer Ethyl Eichelberger is most remembered for his repertoire of self-penned solo plays based on the lives of the great women of history, literature, and myth.

He was born James Roy Eichelberger in Pekin, Illinois on July 17, 1945. He starred in many high school plays and attended Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, where he also performed in plays, including the title roles in *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* his freshman year. In his sophomore year, he transferred to the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City.

After graduating in 1967, Eichelberger began to act at the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, Rhode Island under the direction of Adrian Hall. After working as the troupe's lead character actor for seven years, he moved back to New York City, changed his name to Ethyl, and became a member of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company. There he acted and designed wigs. Ludlam, a major influence on his theatrical vision, encouraged him to write his own plays.

From 1972 until his death in 1990, Eichelberger wrote and performed in nearly forty plays. Most of these works are solo plays written in free-form verse. In them, he played a range of grand dames from Jocasta, Medea, and Klytemnestra to Lola Montez, Nefertitti, and Carlotta, Empress of Mexico. He won an Obie Award in 1982 for *Lucrezia Borgia*.

Eichelberger's plays revel in a kind of poly-literacy that mixes classical references with pop culture. They frequently include such attractions as accordion-accompanied songs, fire eating, cartwheels, and splits. They are preeminently plays of strong women who survive. The plays offer sympathetic if screwball portraits of their title subjects.

The plays anachronistically equate and parallel Eichelberger's own experiences as a gay man and artist with the famous subjects. In his biographical play about the eighteenth dynasty Egyptian monarch *Nefert-iti*, for example, he writes the double edged lines "Isis knows it hasn't been easy! / It's a lot of hard work being a queen! / And there are factions out there who don't like what I represent! / Tough noogies! I have a right to be here!"

Eichelberger's plays were performed in almost any space that might pass as a stage in New York City during the height of the East Village performance bar scene of the 1980s. Among the venues at which they were produced are the Pyramid Club, King Tut's Wah Wah Hut, and 8 B.C., and later at more established venues such as P.S. 122, Dixon Place, La Mama, The Performing Garage, and Dance Theatre Workshop. Eichelberger also took productions of his plays on tour to such far away places as Australia and Europe.

In a volatile artistic and political period, bracketed by disco and AIDS, Eichelberger's high octane performances earned his plays a devoted following. Even today, however, long after his death, the plays remain in performance by theater artists.

Standing a gangly six foot, two inches tall before donning his trademark stiletto heels and skyscraper wigs, Eichelberger was an imposing figure. His stage divas sported tremendous jewelry and a version of gender fuck drag that encouraged his audience to see the performer underneath the costume. His full back was tattooed with a portrait of himself in drag as an angel and he often wore backless gowns to draw attention to the tattoo. His performances were scripted, but they were also highly improvisational.

Eichelberger also enjoyed a successful commercial acting career in the late 1980s. He appeared on Broadway in *The Comedy of Errors* with The Flying Karamazov Brothers and as the Ballad Singer in *3 Penny Opera* with Sting, as well as on HBO's children's television series *Encyclopedia*.

Larger than life, flamboyant, and politically outspoken on stage, Eichelberger was a deeply private individual. Reacting badly to the only AIDS medications available to him in 1990, he committed suicide on August 12 of that year. Only after his death did most people learn that he had been HIV-positive for several years.

Eichelberger's work influenced a generation of queer theater artists from David Drake to Justin Bond and novelists from Matthew Stadler to Michael Cunningham and Tom Spanbauer.

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Joe E. Jeffreys lives in New York City. His writing has appeared in publications from *The Village Voice* to *The Dallas Voice*, from *blue* to *Blueboy*, and from *Bay Windows* to *The Bay Area Reporter*.