



Epperson, John (b. 1955)

by Linda Rapp

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John Epperson has had an extremely successful career performing as the glamorous and hilarious drag character Lypsinka. In addition, he has appeared, both in and out of character, in several plays and films.

Epperson was born April 24, 1955 in Hazlehurst, Mississippi, not a particularly gay-friendly place to grow up. He said in a 2002 interview, "I was always like a changeling in my home . . . like an alien among them." He wondered "why I was so fascinated by show business, when no one else in my family was."

From an early age Epperson took lessons in classical piano, but he was also intrigued by popular music and culture. By the age of four he was lip-synching to his father's records and soon gave dancing a try as well, mimicking Ann-Margret's moves in George Sidney's *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963).

School days were a trial for the boy seen as a "sissy," who was "teased, taunted, [and] physically threatened." He had to teach himself to be less effeminate in order to cope with the schoolmates' cruelty.

After high school Epperson enrolled at Belhaven College, a small Presbyterian institution in Jackson, Mississippi. While there he went to a gay bara "sawdust-on-the-floor-dump" as he recalled it for the first time and saw drag performers doing lip-synching acts. He called the experience "totally frightening because I saw myself up on stage." He realized that drag performers might draw enthusiastic audiences but were also subject to ostracism. Not wishing the latter fate, he stopped going to gay bars for a year.

When Epperson graduated from Belhaven he landed a job playing piano in Colorado, but in 1978 he moved to New York, where he became a rehearsal pianist for the American Ballet Theater. In addition, despite his earlier misgivings Epperson began doing drag performances at nightspots such as Club 57 and the Pyramid.

When Epperson went on tour with the American Ballet he had the opportunity to see sophisticated drag acts in Europe. Modeling his performances on those, Epperson wrote and starred in two drag pieces *Dial "M" for Model* (1987) and *Ballet of the Dolls* (1988), a send-up of Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* before beginning to perform as Lypsinka.

In creating the Lypsinka character he "chose a one-word name to show a sense of humor, but also as an homage to European models with one name." Epperson has said that Lypsinka owes much of her look to 1950s super-model Dovima, and that stage actress Dolores Gray was also part of the "prototype for Lypsinka." Among others who influenced his work he cites Ann-Margret, Charles Pierce, and Charles Ludlam.

Lypsinka first met her public in late 1988 when Epperson's act was a late-night addition to the bill of Charles Busch's *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York. *I Could Go on Lip-*



Top: A portrait of John Epperson by William Claxton (copyright © 2000).

Above: John Epperson as Lypsinka. Photograph by Russell Maynor (copyright © 2000). Courtesy John Epperson.

Synching is the story of Lypsinka's rise from modest beginnings in Louisiana to the status of diva.

The show, which soon moved to the Theater Off Park, was a resounding success, running for slightly over a year in New York. It then went to California, where the production was financed in part by Madonna.

Epperson quit his job with the American Ballet Theater in 1991 in order to devote himself full-time to performing as Lypsinka. His repertoire includes *The Fabulous Lypsinka Show*, *Lypsinka! Now It Can Be Lip-Synched*, *Lypsinka! A Day in the Life*, *Lypsinka! As I Lay Lip-Synching*, and *Lypsinka! The Boxed Set*. For the last he won the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle Award for Best Sound Design, the L.A. Weekly Theatre Award for Best Solo Performance, and the Helen Hayes Award for Best Non-resident Production in 2003. He was also a nominee for Outstanding Lead Actor at the Hayes Awards.

The Lypsinka shows are technically complex, as Epperson weaves together scores of source materials to tell a story. Ringing telephones, bringing matters that demand immediate attention, are a staple of the act as Lypsinka expends extraordinary energy in coping with the exigencies of life. Scenery and lighting designer Mark T. Simpson calls Lypsinka "a 'schizophrenic' character" whose "cueing requires rapid-fire color-wash changes and flashing strobes." He praises Epperson for his planning of the productions: "He's aware of everything. His attention to detail feeds the whole process. In a certain sense, if you can keep up with him, you can't go wrong."

Epperson's performances as Lypsinka can be enjoyed as comedic entertainment. Adelina Anthony calls him "a master of mad elegance, hilarious timing, and perfect physical expression." But there is more to a Lypsinka performance than light comedy. As Anthony also notes, Epperson's "gender-bending show is also a refreshing delight in the way he explores the dilemma of being pigeon-holed, stereotyped, and feared. His work is very pro-woman, pro-individual, and pro-dignity, without the political preaching."

Epperson has commented that "it's so easy to do misogynistic drag humor" but that he has "deliberately tried to avoid that." He adds that "a lot of women, when they see the show, felt liberated and empowered."

Epperson rejects the term "drag queen" for himself and has stated that he does not enjoy much of the drag that is being done because "it is loud and tacky and trashy and has no sensibility or thought behind it." He intends his own work as "a commentary of performance in general and drag performance specifically." However outrageous Lypsinka may be, she is always at heart affectionate toward the women to whose work she performs.

In his cabaret act as Lypsinka Epperson typically does not utter a sound. The entire shows are meticulously crafted from recordings of music and the spoken word, which Epperson interprets through expression and gesture. He has been praised for his ability to convey the wide array of emotions to which Lypsinka is subject as she works her way through the existential crises of her life.

Although Lypsinka does not speak in solo performances, she does when appearing on stage with other actors. The first such occasion came in 1998 in the show *Lypsinka Is Harriet Craig!*, a send-up of Vincent Sherman's 1950 film *Harriet Craig* with Joan Crawford in the title role. The Lypsinka production co-starred drag artist Varla Jean Merman (Jeffery Roberson) as Craig's much put-upon cousin. Epperson has also been seen on the big screen as Lypsinka in Barry Shils' *Wigstock: The Movie* (1995).

Lypsinka has appeared in the George Michael music video "Too Funky" (1999), in several television specials, and in ads for companies such as the Gap and L.A. Eyewear. She has paraded down the runway of Thierry Mugler's fashion shows in Paris, Los Angeles, and Tokyo with other celebrities, including Sharon Stone, Julie Newmar, Jeff Stryker, and Ivana Trump.

Epperson has played drag roles as characters other than Lypsinka on both stage and screen. He earned plaudits as the wicked stepmother in the New York City Opera's 2004 production of Richard Rodgers and

Oscar Hammerstein's *Cinderella*. He portrayed a madam in Paul Schrader's 1994 HBO movie *Witch Hunt* and also plays a woman in Todd Stephens's *Another Gay Movie* (2006).

Epperson has played masculine roles as well, including a turn as RuPaul's boyfriend in Charles Winkler's 1996 film *Red Ribbon Blues*, which did not see theatrical release but has been shown on cable television. He appeared on stage at the New York International Fringe Festival in Patrick E. Horrigan's one-act drama *Messages for Gary*.

In 2004 Epperson launched a new cabaret piece, *Show Trash*, in which he plays piano and sings show tunes. Critic Peter Marks cited "eerie parallels between Superman and Lypsinka . . . Each is an exaggerated version of a manly or feminine ideal. Both might view a red cape as a legitimate fashion statement . . . [but] both have mild-mannered alter egos." Marks praises Epperson for his voice "strong and clear" and his choice of selections "witty, soulful, honest, and like his performances as Lypsinka, a sincere and caring appreciation of the material that he presents."

Epperson has also written a play, *My Deah*, his version of the Medea tale transplanted to Mississippi. It was given several readings, including one at the Studio Theatre in Washington, D. C. in 2004 as a benefit for the Whitman-Walker Clinic, a glbtq health services provider, but not a full theatrical production until October 2006, when it debuted at the June Havoc Theater in New York.

In Epperson's play, Euripides' tragic heroine is re-envisioned as My Deah Hedgepeth, a Louisiana State University beauty queen who has committed the heresy of falling in love with and marrying a football star from arch-rival Ole Miss. *My Deah* finds the couple settled in Jackson, Mississippi and surrounded by a colorful bunch of friends and neighbors.

Structurally, *My Deah* echoes Euripides, but Epperson gives the characters an entirely new voice: his are bawdy and funny, as well as completely devoid of political correctness. The Greek chorus turns into My Deah's bridge club members, played by male actors in drag.

In his dialogue, Epperson includes allusions to prominent Southern writers, such as Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, and William Faulkner, and also pays homage to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company of Charles Ludlam. Although the relationship between My Deah and her cheating husband, Gator, is a heterosexual one, Epperson has imbued other aspects of his story with a homoerotic subtext.

For all its broad humor and bawdy fun, however, *My Deah* is a play with a passionate heart. Reviewer Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* noted the opinion of a friend who had seen many productions of *Medea* and found Epperson's version "the only treatment of the material . . . in which the wronged woman's [killing] of her own children actually seemed understandable."

In March 2009 Epperson staged a reading of James Kirkwood's play *Legends!* to benefit Friends In Deed, an organization that provides support to people with life-threatening diseases, including HIV/AIDS. In addition to adapting the 1987 script to include more contemporary references to popular culture, he performed as Lypsinka and did a star turn lip-synching a song in his role as one of two dueling divas, the other played by fellow drag artist Charles Busch. Lesbian writer Fran Lebowitz took the part of the narrator, and Bryan Batt, the openly gay star of both stage and screen productions, was among the seven-member cast.

Epperson does not see himself as a particularly political person. On the possibility of gay marriage he commented in a 2002 interview, "I understand why people want the legal benefits of marriage. It just doesn't appeal to me to be married at all." A year later he called himself "too idiosyncratic for anybody to live with me," adding that "traditionally most gay guys aren't interested in going with drag performers, because they just can't go there."

Epperson has stated on various occasions that although the status of outsider can be difficult, he prefers

individualism to assimilation. In a 2003 interview he said, "When I see [gay] people who want to be assimilated into the mainstream, I can only say that if Tennessee Williams had wanted to be assimilated into the mainstream, he would never have written *Streetcar*. Being an outsider made him what he was."

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