



## Pierce, Charles (1926-1999)

by Bud Coleman

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"You can call me an impersonator, an impressionist, a mimic, or a comic in a dress. But not a drag queen! A drag queen is someone who dresses up and goes to a ball! I'm an entertainer," Charles Pierce told the *New York Post's* Bob Harrington in 1988.

Before gay culture became more visible in the 1970s, this self-proclaimed male actress was a courageous pioneer. In the clubs where he played (beginning in the 1950s), Pierce took a public, aggressive stance against homophobia in the conviction that lightening fast wit, a serious attitude, and consummate acting skill could vanquish oppression.

While this camp vaudevillian's repertoire of jokes often seemed between 2,000 and 3,000 years old, his brilliant delivery and dead-on impressions made his act a non-stop laugh fest.

Often veering unexpectedly into lengthy serious monologues by Katharine Hepburn from *Lion in Winter* or *Coco*, or into a stirring rendition of Dietrich's "Illusion," Pierce gave his act a humanity and poignancy often absent in other drag acts. Pierce revered the timing of Jack Benny and Bea Arthur; and many in his audience recognized that beneath the dresses, wigs, and lipstick was a comic mastermind.

As a drag artist, Pierce never aimed for complete illusion in his impersonation of his female icons. Audiences were always aware of the man in Pierce's gallery of women.

In 1990, he called his show "The Legendary Ladies of the Silver Screen: All Talking, All Singing, All Dancing . . . All Dead." His targets/homages included "turban ladies" such as Norma Shearer, Maria Montez, Gloria Swanson, and Maria Ouspenskaya, with stopover zings at Mae West, Carol Channing, and Barbara Stanwyck.

Born in Watertown, New York on July 14, 1926, Pierce started his acting training at the legendary Pasadena Playhouse, then split his time between a radio job at home and summer stock in Newport, Rhode Island.

When Arthur Blake (who did impressions of Bette Davis, Charles Laughton, and Tallulah Bankhead) rejected material submitted to him by Pierce, the latter decided to perform the act himself, initially at parties.

His first paying gig was Altadena, California's Café La Vie in 1954. Because of laws against cross-dressing, Pierce performed in a tux with accessories such as a boa, hats, and pocketbooks. Ann Dee, of Ann's 440 Club in San Francisco, saw Pierce and got him started on the cabaret circuit.

In Florida, at Miami Beach's Red Carpet, Pierce met his future show-biz partner, Rio Dante. With Dante as the "straight man," their act consisted of some lip sync and puppets (the Moppettes--headless puppets that Pierce would put up to his own face and then perform outrageous dialogue). In 1962, the duo opened at San Francisco's Gilded Cage, where they played a record six years.

Other legendary gigs included "saving" the Plush Room in San Francisco's York Hotel in the early 1980s, and

lengthy engagements at San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel's Venetian Room and New York's Top of the Gate and The Ballroom.

Dante was dropped from the act, and for the rest of his career Pierce performed solo--dubbing himself "La Suberba of Transvestivania"--frequently joined by the best musical directors/accompanists in the country: Michael Biagi, Michael Ashton, and Joan Edgar, among others. Michael Feinstein accompanied him at the Backlot of Studio One in 1981.

Pierce not only had difficulty with strict cross-dressing ordinances around the country, but he also was sometimes attacked by some members of the gay community. In 1980, all sixty members of the San Francisco Lesbian Chorus walked out of a benefit at the Castro Theater when Pierce performed. They demanded a public apology for jokes such as "Liz Taylor has more chins than a Chinese phone book" and an analysis of why Pierce's show was "racist, sexist, classist, and women-hating."

When Pierce "abdicated" from the stage in the mid-1990s, he no doubt sensed that the audience who would recognize his cast of the stars of yesterday was dying out. He introduced an impersonation of Joan Collins into his act, but admitted he could find nothing comic about younger female performers.

He appeared on numerous television shows (not always in drag), including *Fame*, *Laverne and Shirley*, *Designing Women*, *Starsky & Hutch*, and *Love, American Style*. His films include *Rabbit Test* (1978), *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988), and *Nerds of a Feather* (1990).

He also issued several recordings, including *Live at Bimbo's* (ca 1972) on the Blue Thumb label, and a video, *Charles Pierce at The Ballroom* (1988).

Pierce also created a successful line of comic greeting cards that featured him in various drag star personas accompanied by witty one-liners.

"The Master and Mistress of Surprise and Disguise," as he was billed, died of cancer on May 31, 1999, having been weakened by an earlier stroke. He was 72.

Charles Pierce wanted to be remembered as an actor who made his living doing "some really good impressions." His pioneering work as a camp gender illusionist paved the way for Charles Busch, RuPaul, and Lady Bunny, among many others.

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