



Vilanch, Bruce (b. 1948)

by Linda Rapp

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An award-winning comedy writer, Bruce Vilanch has other strings to his bow. He has appeared on stage, television, and film, writes for *The Advocate* and other publications, and is a tireless proponent of glbtq causes.

Born in New York City on November 23, 1948, Bruce Vilanch was adopted at the age of four by Dr. Jonas Vilanch, an optometrist, and his wife, Henne Vilanch, a homemaker who loved show business and performed in charity shows.

Vilanch grew up in Paterson, New Jersey. As a child he modeled, mainly in the "Charming Chub" division of Lane Bryant, and also did some acting in summer stock.

Vilanch realized early in life that he was gay and learned to use humor "partly to deflect peer-group persecution."

After high school Vilanch enrolled at the Ohio State University, where he appeared in student productions and wrote reviews in what he hoped would be preparation for a playwriting career. "I was going to be Neil Simon, batting out one Broadway show after another," he said in 1999.

As it turned out, his writing career began instead at the *Chicago Tribune*, where he got a job as a reviewer and columnist. After he reviewed a performance by Bette Midler, she called him, and in the course of their conversation Vilanch suggested that she ought to put more jokes into her act. When Midler asked him for some comic lines, Vilanch, who was then moonlighting as a cabaret performer, offered some, thus beginning a long professional relationship.

In addition to providing material for Midler's club act, he co-wrote the 1980 film *Divine Madness* (directed by Michael Ritchie) for her as well as her television specials *Bette Midler: Ol' Red Head Is Back* (1978) and *Bette Midler in Concert: Diva Las Vegas* (1997).

Vilanch quit his newspaper job in 1975 and moved to Hollywood to do comedy writing full-time. He continued to write material for Midler and also for the variety shows that were popular at the time. He worked with stars like Carol Burnett and Dean Martin and wrote gags for *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour* (1977) and *The Donny and Marie Show* (1976-1979), where he faced, wrote Stephen Holden, "the formidable task of making Donny and Marie Osmond sound semi-hip."

Vilanch's aspirations to become the next Neil Simon did not meet with success: his 1978 musical, *Platinum*, closed after only 33 performances.

The failure of the play was a great professional disappointment to Vilanch, but his comedy-writing skills were still much in demand.

Vilanch used his talents not only to earn a living but also to fight AIDS. He had experienced the devastation of the pandemic at first hand. "When you have to bury three or four friends a month, that's tough," he said of those grim days.

Vilanch began performing regularly at benefits and remains strongly committed to the cause of AIDS research and education.

Over the years Vilanch has become recognized as the premier comedy writer for awards shows. His material has become a fixture of Oscar, Emmy, and Tony Awards telecasts. Vilanch has won two Emmy Awards himself for his work on the Academy Awards shows in 1991 and 1992.

Vilanch became an audience favorite when he joined the cast of the revival of the television game show *Hollywood Squares* in 1998. During his four-year stint with the program he was also head writer, providing witty banter for the celebrities who took part.

Vilanch was both the subject and star of Andrew J. Kuehn's 1999 documentary *Get Bruce!*, which featured interviews with stars such as Midler, Robin Williams, Billy Crystal, and Whoopi Goldberg, who all benefited from Vilanch's comedy writing talents. Also appearing was Vilanch's mother, who stole all her scenes. Vilanch is extremely close to her and credits her with developing his sense of humor.

Vilanch took to the stage in 2000 with *Bruce Vilanch: Almost Famous*, a show about his life and career. After treating the spectators to behind-the-scenes tales of his work with performers on television shows and on stage--Tallulah Bankhead and Sophie Tucker among the latter--Vilanch fielded questions from the audience and responded with characteristic wit.

Vilanch has recently appeared in the musical *Hairspray* (book by Mark O'Donnell and Thomas Meehan, music and lyrics by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman) based on the 1988 John Waters film of the same name. Vilanch played Edna Turnblad, the role originated by Divine in the movie, with the show's national touring company in 2003, and the following year he replaced Harvey Fierstein in the Broadway production.

Despite his considerable girth, Vilanch had to don a "35-pound fat suit" to play Edna. He also had to sacrifice his beard, which for over thirty years had been part of his trademark look--along with large, colorful eyeglasses and any one of the T-shirts in his collection (said to number well over 1,000). The departure of the (almost?) famous beard was televised on the *Live with Regis and Kelly* morning show.

Since 1980 Vilanch has been a reporter and columnist for the magazine *The Advocate*, for which he has written both humorous and serious pieces. A collection of his writings, *Bruce!: My Adventures in the Skin Trade and Other Essays* (2000), was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award.

Vilanch has been the recipient of a number of awards for his copious work in support of glbtq rights and AIDS charities. Among these are the Los Angeles Shanti Foundation's Daniel P. Warner Service Award (1990), GLAAD Media's Stephen F. Kolzak Award (1997), the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center's Rand Schrader Distinguished Achievement Award (1998), the Outfest Honors Award for contributions to gay and lesbian visibility (2002), and the AIDS Project of Los Angeles Hero Award (2003).

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.