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Charles Busch and Theatre-in-Limbo

Niles, Richard, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1993

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A

CHARLES BUSCH AND THEATRE-IN-LIMBO

by

RICHARD NILES

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1993

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

CHARLES BUSCH AND THEATRE-IN-LIMBO

by

Richard Niles

Adviser: Professor Judith Milhous

Between 1984 and 1991, Theatre-in-Limbo presented a series of genre parodies which introduced drag performance to a growing number of mainstream New York audiences. This study is an historical overview of Charles Busch, actor/playwright, and the company for which he wrote. After an examination of Busch's first plays in Chicago (1975-1977), and his career as a solo performer (1978-1984), the study investigates the company's origins during the East Village renaissance of the mid-80s. Limbo's subsequent achievements have been placed in the context of contemporary gender theory, camp, and the gay sensibility, in order to aid in understanding the company's durability, the phenomenon of its cult audience, its production choices, and its manner of performance.

Limbo's productions (Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium, Times Square Angel, Sleeping Beauty, or Coma, Pardon My Inquisition, Gidget Goes Psychotic/Psycho Beach Party, The Lady in Question, and Red Scare on Sunset) are shown to share several traits: camp treatment of material; cheap theatrics; metatheatrical conceits; and gender play through the use of drag performance. These

features are addressed as each play is explored. In addition, the contributions of various other members are noted: Kenneth Elliott as director/producer; Brian Whitehill (sets), Vivien Leone (lights) and the various other designers; and the company of actors.

Although Busch and his company introduced drag to a wider audience by crossing over into major commercial theatre, a significant number of theatre-goers still resisted the act of drag and the camp sensibility, causing the progressively shorter runs which Limbo experienced. The last three film genre parodies the company produced are shown to reveal a growing ability to exploit the potential of drag beyond mere entertainment, while the most recent production, Red Scare on Sunset, which the author observed throughout its rehearsal and performance period, is shown to contain the company's most innovative performance and design elements.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the following study, which deals with contemporary theatre artists, I have been fortunate indeed to have obtained the enthusiastic cooperation of my subjects. Press agent Sam Rudy made available to me files which included an extensive collection of journalistic material on Theatre-in-Limbo. Kyle Renick and the staff of the WPA Theatre allowed me to come and go at will; their hospitality and good will helped make my on-site study of Red Scare on Sunset possible. The same must be said of the the Lucille Lortel Theatre staff and producers Drew Dennet and Manny Kladitis. The cast of Red Scare and other members of Theatre-in-Limbo shared their possessions, observations, and memories, enabling me to tell their story with greater depth and insight than would otherwise have been possible.

Several individuals must be singled out for their their particular contributions. Julie Halston initiated this project by showing Charles Busch a seminar paper I had written on The Lady in Question and voicing her belief that a history of the company should be attempted. Andy Halliday made copies of videotaped performances so that I could study them at my leisure. Kenneth Elliott let me attend rehearsals and ask countless questions at inconvenient times. In addition, he allowed me to peruse his files, datebooks, and other personal effects without restrictions. His interviews were always filled with candor, humor, and insights that often made me re-examine my conclusions. Charles Busch aided me in countless ways. He gave me tapes and scripts of his work that dated back to his earliest efforts in 1975; introduced me to

others who figured in Limbo's story; and spoke with me for many hours, during formal and informal interviews. Moreover, his attempt to address sometimes painful issues revealed a sense of courage and honesty which was exemplary.

I would also like to thank Professors Daniel Gerould and Marion P. Holt, who have influenced and supported my work during my stay at the Graduate Center. My gratitude goes to Professor Vera Roberts for making a substantial fellowship available to me during the final year of my dissertation work. My committee members Professors Marvin Carlson and Walter Meserve gave constructive criticism and astute reactions to various drafts that helped give this study its final shape. Lastly, I must thank my dissertation supervisor, Professor Judith Milhous, who throughout my years as a graduate student, has functioned as my mentor. Her support, encouragement, and guidance, made my journey towards a Ph.D one of the most profound and gratifying experiences of my life.

To my parents, Rose and Walter Niles, who completed their own Ph.D's when many people of similar ages were buying condominiums in Florida to retire, I dedicate this dissertation with love and gratitude.

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INTRODUCTION

Since its beginnings in an East Village bar in 1984, Theatre-in-Limbo has introduced more and more members of the mainstream New York theatre audience to camp and cross-dressing as a performance style.¹ Charles Busch, as leading performer and resident playwright, has written a series of genre parodies tailored to himself and an on-going group of actors. The reception of their first short works, forty-five minute divertissements, whose sole purpose was amusement, encouraged Busch and his company to develop longer plays which experiment with drag performance in more provocative ways. The result has been full-length pieces which not only entertain but also use parody and cross-dressing to address issues of gender, sexuality, and politics.

While a sizable amount of journalism has been written about Theatre-in-Limbo (interviews, articles), no scholarly investigation has attempted to trace the company's development. This study offers the first historical overview of the company, undertaking, where possible, to disentangle the facts of its development from the myth Limbo quickly generated about itself. The author of this dissertation agrees with recent theorists that complete objectivity on the part of the historian is not possible.² He has nevertheless set out to develop a more than purely personal vantage point on the subject. He hopes to construct a history that differs from journalistic accounts in two related ways. The scope of this study, which covers the seven year span of Limbo's activity (1984-1991), as well Busch's prior career as playwright and solo

performer (1976-1984), allows for a more considered assessment than is possible from a journalistic perspective. Second, instead of being uncritically receptive to whatever view of itself the company was offering at the moment, this study is analytical. It tests assertions and questions opinions. While no doubt the conclusions arrived at will in turn be subject to question, this investigator has at least tried to consult a wide variety of sources, to verify facts, and to resist simply repeating what he was told.

To aid this analysis, Limbo's achievement has been set in the context of contemporary gender theory. The purpose of this study is to trace the development of a theatrical troupe rather than extend theatrical theory, but theory helps explain the surprising durability the company has shown, both in its approach and in its cohesiveness. Had the personnel of Limbo changed radically with each production, had it developed several playwrights, the dynamics of the company would be different, and so would its productions. Theatre-in-Limbo is by no means the only company of the 1980s and 1990s to offer its audiences camp productions and drag performances, but more than other groups with comparable styles, Limbo actively sought mainstream audiences and thereby broadened their understanding of what theatre as a performing art might be.

Four main types of material were used in researching this study: playtexts (unpublished manuscripts and promptbooks); criticism/journalism (newspapers, periodicals, and journals); taped interviews (which were then transcribed); and videotapes/audiotapes of performances. In addition, the author was allowed to observe Red Scare on Sunset (1991) "in the making." The company members were highly cooperative in sharing material for research purposes. Personal files, which

included legal documents, contracts, business and private correspondence, and photographs, were made available. However, two of the most important aspects of this inquiry were the interviews and tapes which provided insights on and understanding of the performance aesthetics of this company.

The texts which Busch has provided for his company are vehicles for performance. The originality, sophistication, and distinctive quality that marks Theatre-in-Limbo is to be found in that most ephemeral of arts, the live performance. What makes this material fascinating is observing the audience/performer interaction. The centerpiece of this company's work is, after all, drag performance. In addition, the strategy of camp is to be found not on the printed page, but in the reaction of the spectator to the signs and codes being presented. Luckily, the company was conscientious in their efforts to record their work, and each production was videotaped. Some were taped several times over the course of their runs, so that an evolution of performance could be charted. In the seven years of its existence, Theatre-in-Limbo had amassed a sizeable body of work on which to base a full-length analysis and a complete video documentation of that work which allowed the researcher to study it at leisure.

Added to this invaluable audio/visual library were the taped interviews with company members and various other individuals. The majority of these interviews were held between January 1991 and October 1992, beginning with the Busch/Elliott pre-production meetings for Red Scare on Sunset. These interviews contained reactions to rehearsals and performances as the subjects were experiencing them. They also included recollections, opinions, confessions, and memories of events that

sometimes dated back a decade or more; in Busch's case, even further--to early childhood. Not surprisingly, these recollections were not always lucid; sometimes subjects contradicted each other; at other times memory simply failed. For this chronicle, stories were checked for authenticity; other sources (playbills, reviews, contracts) were used to establish facts, but eventually the researcher had to make his own judgments on the subjects' reliability. As Limbo's resident director, Kenneth Elliott, says, "after those two performances at the Limbo Lounge, the legend began, and we've been revising it ever since."³

Several important things were gleaned from these interviews, which could not have been obtained from reviews and articles printed at the time. One was the genuine affection and respect this group of people felt for each other, a major factor in keeping this company together for so long. Another was the ability to assign credit for decisions, artistic and otherwise. And the process by which these plays have been created has, the author hopes, been illuminated more than would otherwise have been possible.

The author kept a journal from 4 January 1991 to 27 October 1992, which consists of informal interviews, notes to augment formal interviews, and "The Red Scare Diary," which includes notes on meetings, rehearsals, and performances of Red Scare on Sunset at the WPA and Lucille Lortel Theatres. The journal, along with the interviews, is the major source for direct quotation used throughout this study. Any point in this narrative that could not be documented is qualified by "according to" or some such restriction. For the sake of clarity, blatant typographical mistakes in

unpublished material have been corrected, but grammar has been reproduced untouched.⁴

The analysis of Limbo's first seven productions is based on interviews, audio/visual material, promptbooks, and printed criticism. The examination of their eighth production, Red Scare on Sunset, is augmented by the author's presence throughout rehearsals and performances. Any writer on performance involved in on-site research brings to the task a personal set of prejudices which color the report, but one of the advantages this type of work offers is to make an evaluation, which would otherwise be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to discern, and back it up with evidence gathered from personal observation. Some elements of the production's story probably would not have found their way into the narrative otherwise, and certainly not with the detail and accuracy that on-site observation provided. Examples include Elliott's contribution to the development of Red Scare, Busch's personal conflict about how "real" to make his performance, and the evolution of the dream sequence.

An explanation should be made for distinguishing Busch from the rest of the company in the title of this dissertation. Many theatre companies seem to have an internal clock which sets a life expectancy on their original membership. Of course, many variables enter into the equation of when change takes place, but at some point in time significant members leave to pursue work on their own. Yet, when these artists, who seem vital to the very existence of the organization, leave, the company survives. Circle Repertory Company has continued without Marshal Mason, Mabou

Mines without Joanne Akalaitis. Even the death of Charles Ludlam did not spell the end of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

Theatre-in-Limbo comes together only when Busch writes a show to perform. When he is not involved, the machinery grinds to a halt and no new productions are forthcoming. While Andy Halliday has presented two plays Off-Off Broadway, they have not been produced under the banner of Theatre-in-Limbo. (In fact, Lypsinka has been the only artist to be presented by Theatre-in-Limbo, in a limited engagement at the Provincetown Playhouse.) Busch is the motivating force behind his company--the *raison d'être*. The question then arises, is Theatre-in-Limbo truly a company? In Theatre Language, Bowman and Ball define "company" as follows:

A group of actors appearing together in one or more dramatic performances; usually understood to include also the business officials, stagehands, and others associated with the actors in production. Also as *acting* (or *dramatic* or *theatrical*) company.⁵

By this definition, Theatre-in-Limbo is, indeed, a company. The designers--Whitehill (sets), Leone (lights), and Carr (wigs)--have remained constant throughout Limbo's existence. Kolodner and Halliday have appeared in all the productions, and only illness and death prevented Robinson and Carey from taking roles in Red Scare on Sunset. Elliott has produced most of the Off-Broadway productions and directed all of them. And playwright-in-residence Busch has always written his scripts for particular company members, shaping roles to specific characteristics of the actors. In fact, a significant metatheatrical dimension to a Limbo production is that the company behaves as if the play is being performed by a "star who has seen better days" and a stock company of players whose financial situation compels them to resort to cheap theatrics.

Because this study sees Busch in a position of such consequence, the first two chapters are devoted to his early work in Chicago (1975-77) and his solo performances (1978-84). There are several reasons for an examination of Busch's career prior to his association with Theatre-in-Limbo. The initial playwriting efforts at Northwestern University, the drag performances in Chicago, and the first attempt at forming a theatre company, the Imitation of Life Company, shed light on his later work with Limbo and creates a through-line to this chronicle; Busch's career did not suddenly "jump-start" in 1984. The solo years also illuminate an area of Busch's artistry that is often overshadowed by the flashier successes with Limbo. As playwright, he was capable of far more substantial work than the sketch comedy of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom suggested, and as an actor, he had appeared out of drag for almost as long as he had performed in it. Since no previous analysis of his pre-Limbo career had been attempted at the time of this writing, here was an occasion to research facts and reach conclusions that would be relevant to the company saga.

This study demonstrates that although Busch was essential to the creation of the company, he could not have done it without the participation of other key figures. Elliott would seem to have little sympathy with Busch's sensibility; he did not like drag theatre and hated camp. Yet perhaps as a result of his antipathy to these elements, or because he treated these works with a disciplined, conservative approach, he guided the company towards a style which endowed its camp sensibility with a sincerity that gave added depth and substance to its performance.

If Limbo has a consistent visual style it is due to Brian Whitehill, the resident set designer. Whitehill created the feeling of a theatre company by inventing a visual

tradition, creating a history for a company that had only been in existence for several months. In addition, the strongly theatrical setting Whitehill and Leone provided for Busch's work softened his drag by naturalizing it.

Each chapter in this study focuses on a play or series of plays in chronological order. Chapter One gives a brief biography of Busch and describes his Chicago plays, written while he was attending Northwestern University and the year following his graduation, when he formed his first company. Chapter Two traces Busch's solo career (1978-1984) prior to his association with Theatre-in-Limbo, and discusses the contribution of his directors: Patrick Brafford, Peter Napolitano, Ron Vigneau, and Kenneth Elliott. Chapter Three examines the company's work during their first year at the Limbo Lounge: Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium, Times Square Angel. Chapter Four focuses on Coma, Pardon My Inquisition, the Off-Broadway transfer of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, and suggests several reasons for the latter's record-breaking run. Gidget Goes Psychotic (Limbo Lounge) and its Off-Broadway version, Psycho Beach Party are examined in Chapter Five, and Chapter Six recounts the development of Limbo's most critically successful production, The Lady in Question, at the WPA and the Orpheum Theatre, and suggests several causes for its commercial failure. Chapter Seven traces the development of Red Scare on Sunset from script sessions between Busch and Elliott to the closing at the Lucille Lortel Theatre.

These chapters will show that, along with Busch, no small part of the company's success is due to the contributions of Elliott, Whitehill, as well as the actors and the other Limbo designers. Busch may have been the instigator for Limbo

productions, and is certainly its most celebrated member, but Limbo's story is about the serendipitous dynamic between a group of highly diverse temperaments which resulted in a series of striking theatre pieces. These plays featured drag and symbols of popular culture in a way that shed light on how we construct images such as gender, and what is taken for granted as part of the ideology by which we live. Audience response to its genre parodies also confirms Noel Coward's observation on popular culture: "extraordinary, how potent cheap music is."⁶

NOTES

1. The Oxford English Dictionary, 2d ed, defines drag as "feminine attire worn by a man; also a party or dance attended by men wearing feminine attire." According to Bruce Rodgers, Gay Talk (New York: Paragon Books, 1979), 67-68, the term "drag" came from nineteenth century British theatrical slang and indicated petticoats worn by male actors playing female roles. The word derived from the drag of a dress as it trailed on the ground. Tony Thorne, in the Dictionary of Contemporary Slang (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), 149-150, states that it remained in marginal use until the 1950s, when it was adopted by British and Australian youth and became widespread by the 1960s.

2. See Bruce A. McConachie, "Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History," in Theatre Journal 37 (December 1985): 465-486; Joseph Roach, "Mardi Gras Indians and Others: Genealogies of American Performance," Theatre Journal 44 (December 1992): 461-483. McConachie cites phenomenologist Hans-Georg Gadamer:

Gadamer asserts, the historian's selection and interpretation of facts invariably involves "prejudice" . . . Without prejudicial preconceptions about the likely significance of historical facts--prejudices which are inevitable anyway--the historian would have no basis upon which to select his facts in the first place (468).

3. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 10 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

4. For example, Walter Goodman's review of Times Square Angel in the New York Times, 17 December 1985, reads, "By the end, Irish, that tough broad, touches a spot soft." There is no need to reproduce these printing errors, which would just confuse the reader. On the other hand, there is no way to correct grammar in a transcription of an interview without taking on the task of an editor.

5. Robert Hamilton Ball and Walter Parker Bowman, Theatre Language (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961), 73.

6. Noel Coward, Private Lives, in Play Parade (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1933), 209.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHICAGO PLAYS

The idea that masculine and feminine behavior is defined by codes such as dress, body movement, and gesture is fast becoming a commonplace of academic thought.¹ When Busch plays the heroine in his parodies of Hollywood film genres, his work rises above that of a skillful clown, for as Herbert Muschamp observes:

Drag exploits artifice and theatricality as metaphors for the illusions and conventions that stylize modern life. They [drag performers] know as well as the most scholarly semiotician that society operates by means of codes: sign languages not only of gender but of class, race, and political persuasion.²

Even in Theatre-in-Limbo's earliest work, Vampire Lesbians of Sodom (1984) and Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium (1984), drag is intentionally used to expose femininity as an aesthetic construction. In its most recent play, Red Scare on Sunset (1991), the company has extended the use of gender play to deal with political extremism, artistic censorship--even the limits drag itself places on the actor.

This chapter seeks to accomplish two goals: after a brief summary of the history of drag on the American stage, it defines some terms central to this study; it then turns to a consideration of Busch's background, his college career, and his first company, formed the year after he graduated from Northwestern University.

Drag performance is, of course, no stranger to American popular entertainment.³ During the 1840s, female impersonation found a home in the minstrel show, but its heyday on the American stage was between the 1890s and the

end of World War One, when vaudeville enjoyed its greatest popularity. During this period, Julian Eltinge managed to cross-over onto the legitimate stage, but most female impersonators, such as Bert Savoy, Karyl Norman, and Barquette, found the vaudeville stage, with its emphasis on comedy, more hospitable to drag performance. In speaking of twentieth century drag tradition, Roger Baker notes, "comedy must always dominate in any drag act if it is to remain within the bounds of good taste and not drive an audience into a frenzy of embarrassment"(159). By the 1930s, vaudeville had died, and female impersonation was relegated to the intimate clubs of Greenwich Village. In addition, public taste had shifted. Slide notes that during this same period audiences, who were becoming more aware of homosexuality, were apt to associate female impersonation with deviant sexual behavior, and they resisted drag as a form of popular entertainment. Anomalies such as T.C. Jones in the Broadway revue New Faces of 1956 can be found, but by the 1960s, when John Vaccaro and Charles Ludlam began garnering attention with their work, drag was generally performed in clubs and bars with a predominantly gay clientele.⁴

Following the pioneering efforts of Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which culminated in their acclaimed production of Camille (1973), a number of performers, including Ethyl Eichelberger, John Kelly, Lypsinka (John Epperson), and Everett Quinton, among others, continued to experiment with cross-dressing in ways that transcended its traditional use by drag queens and comedians.⁵ But because Charles Busch limited himself to female roles with Theatre-in-Limbo, his identity is more strongly linked with drag than for example, that of Everett Quinton, who became artistic director of the Ridiculous Theatrical

Company when Ludlam died in 1987 and has played male as well as female characters. Others, like Eichelberger and Kelly, addressed their work to coterie audiences in out-of-the-way East Village venues, which limited their following.

Busch, however, yearned to address a wider public, and his aesthetic choices were often prompted by this desire. Although Theatre-in-Limbo began in an East Village club, it moved Vampire Lesbians of Sodom and Coma to a more convenient West Village theatre and latter transferred three other productions to Off-Broadway. If Busch's preoccupation with public acceptance hindered his experimentation, it also made his work more accessible. Vampire Lesbians of Sodom holds the record for longest running Off-Broadway non-musical play, with two thousand and twenty-four performances after fourteen previews.⁶ Therefore, Busch and his troupe must be credited with a major share in the successful revival of drag in the New York theatre.⁷

Busch does not write gay drama, which, as John Clum notes in Acting Gay, contains main characters who are gay and primarily addresses a gay audience about shared experiences.⁸ While most Limbo plays contain a gay character (Psycho Beach Party (1987) and Red Scare on Sunset even feature a gay subplot), the leading character is always a woman (Busch) involved in a heterosexual relationship. Therefore, the plays' subject matter appears to direct itself, for the most part, to a heterosexual mainstream audience. Yet the Limbo company unanimously acknowledge that gay audiences respond with more enthusiasm to a Limbo show than do straight audiences, and the author of this study, who has observed audience reaction at numerous performances of Red Scare on Sunset (1991), agrees with their

assessment. These loyal cult audiences are, in large part, responsible for the initial success of Theatre-in-Limbo.

Certain definitions and explanations of terms are now in order: the "gay sensibility" and "camp" and its attributes.⁹ Busch may not write gay drama, but his work is filled with a gay sensibility to which gay audiences respond, of which "camp" is a dominant aspect. Susan Sontag, in her seminal essay, "Notes on Camp," stops short of stating that camp is a product of a gay sensibility. However, since Sontag's essay first appeared in 1964, many writers of the camp phenomenon argue otherwise.¹⁰ Jack Babuscio, in his essay "The Cinema of Camp," states that without acknowledging the relationship between camp and the gay sensibility, "the assumption remains . . . that camp has emerged from out of no intelligent body of socio-cultural phenomena."¹¹ Because there is clearly a link between gay audiences and Limbo productions, a common ground which brings about the communication and appreciation of camp humor, this study aligns itself with those critics who see camp as originating in the gay subculture, while acknowledging that camp treatment can often infiltrate and/or be coopted by the dominant heterosexual culture.

In "The Affective Sensibility of Fandom," Lawrence Grossberg defines "sensibility" in this way:

We can call the particular relationship that holds any context together, that binds cultural forms and audiences, a 'sensibility.' A sensibility is a particular form of engagement or mode of operation. It identifies the specific sorts of effects that the elements within a context can produce; it defines the possible relationships between texts and audiences located within its spaces.¹²

More specifically, for Babuscio, the gay sensibility is defined as "a perception of the world that is colored, shaped, directed and defined by the fact of one's gayness."¹³

Because gays often cannot reveal their authentic identity in the dominant heterosexual culture, they must essentially play a role comprised of socially approved gender expectations. Babuscio calls this strategy "passing" and observes that such maneuvers in social interaction often give gays a heightened awareness of role playing, surfaces, and the construct of gender.¹⁴ Even in the post-Stonewall era, concealment is often a function of their daily lives. Gay audiences respond energetically to a Theatre-in-Limbo performance because they understand from their own lives the artifice and masquerade that is the source of drag performance.

A gay sensibility influences writer/performers like Busch through texts (subject matter and treatment) and acting choices (references to Hollywood movie stars and camp icons), whether or not the works that result are classified as gay drama. This same sensibility influences audiences, as well. They endow objects, gestures, and phrases with meaning derived from their shared experience as members of a gay subculture.

Michael Bronski, in Culture Clash (1984), sees camp as a strategy gays use to transform the world into a congenial environment. Camp is a way of re-imagining

the real, hostile world into a new one which is controllable and safe . . . it exaggerates and therefore diffuses real threats . . . By exaggerating, stylizing, and remaking what is usually thought to be average or normal, camp creates a world in which the real becomes unreal, the threatening, unthreatening.¹⁵

Bronski and Babuscio note that camp is not a thing or person, but rather a relationship between the object and the observer.¹⁶ Camp is attracted to nostalgia and can appropriate objects: hula hoops, oversized sunglasses with sequins; dialogue: "fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy night" (All About Eve); clothing: women's hats with ostrich feathers; and individuals: Mae West, Bette Davis. The examples

given are not a product of the gay subculture, but are rendered camp as a result of the gay sensibility. Because this sensibility is shaped by ever-changing cultural forces, the element of camp perceived in objects, behavior, or personalities is in a constant state of flux.

A brief summary of camp's traits is given in Richard Dyer's Heavenly Bodies (1986):

Camp is a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalization and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable.¹⁷

These basic features of camp can be seen in all of Busch's work with Limbo, and specific illustrations will be given as each Limbo production is discussed.

Busch's acting persona is an example of a personality constructed with incongruous elements that are exaggerated for camp effect. As he observes:

I've always played a duality. I guess I've always felt a duality in myself, elegance and vulgarity. There's humor in that. I've always found that fun on stage, as well. It's not enough for me to be the whore. I have to be the whore with pretensions or the great lady with a vulgar streak. It's the duality that I find interesting.¹⁸

Other Limbo players use this strategy, as well, and exaggeration renders the duality absurd and comic. Julie Halston's characters are always trying to be cultured, high-status society women. Theresa Aceves's characterizations are almost schizophrenic in their behavioral swings: sweet Pollyanna alternating with raging Medea.

These character adjustments imply impersonation and role playing, or "passing." Drag, as an expression of camp, is the ultimate role playing. Busch has said that he does not view his work as political, but the act of putting on a dress makes a statement beyond simple entertainment; it shows gender to be a cultural

construction. Jonathan Dollimore, in Sexual Dissidence (1991), notes that camp renders gender a question of aesthetics, "the recognition that what seems like mimetic realism is actually an effect of convention, genre, form, or some other kind of artifice."¹⁹ Drag, as practiced by Busch and his fellow actors, becomes an effective way of demonstrating these sets of codes. Busch clearly enjoys blurring the lines of gender demarcation: "I'm the entertainer which belongs to no sex, no gender. I see the clown gender-free."²⁰

Another attribute of camp is the recurrence of certain female movie stars as camp icons. Busch bases a good deal of his characterization on physical and vocal references to specific stars and star acting. This attraction to Hollywood stars can be explained by perceiving camp as a gay ideology. Andrew Ross, in No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture (1989), finds that

denied the possibility of "masculine" and "feminine" positions of spectatorship, and excluded by conventional representations of male-as-hero or narrative agent, and female-as-image or object of the spectacle, the lived spectatorship of gay male and lesbian subcultures is expressed largely through imaginary or displaced relations to the straight meanings of these images and discourses of a parent culture.²¹

Bronski finds that this displacement manifests itself by an identification with women as emotional subjects, since society has created a gender dichotomy in which men "act" and women "feel." Gay men are frequently attracted to the profane Hollywood movie star: glamorous, intense, aggressive, sexual.²² The Busch heroine is a perpetual variation on this theme. In fact, the entire Limbo canon can be seen as an illustration of Bronski's thesis.

All this does not mean that heterosexual audiences cannot appreciate and enjoy a Theatre-in-Limbo production. Clearly they do; positive response from critics and

the general public testify to this. The above discussion merely tries to explain what causes the marked difference between gay and heterosexual audience response. If camp is a result of the gay sensibility, then the exclusivity which surrounds it should make it inaccessible to a mainstream audience. Part of what makes Theatre-in-Limbo's work unique is that its style of camp is congenial and approachable. Audiences do not find these productions filled with esoteric references which bar them from participation in the event. Yet camp does create boundaries of address. This study will demonstrate that there is a limited audience for a Limbo play, due, in part, to the restricted appeal of camp.

Turning from definitions to particulars, Busch is found to have begun writing in earnest at Northwestern University, where he was a student, and it was there that his first play was produced. This piece, Sister Act (1976), also featured his first performance in drag. Two other drag plays followed, Old Coozies (1976) and Myrtle Pope (1977), his first attempt at genre parody. These early efforts, as well as several unproduced plays, are forerunners of the solo pieces and the Limbo comedies. They contain insights into Busch's world-picture, and show the growth process by which he began to find his unique style as a writer/performer as exemplified in the Limbo comedies.

Before these works are investigated, a brief summary of Busch's childhood follows. While neither particularly harsh or cruel, Busch's early years were profoundly affected by his mother's premature death and his father's inability to take on parental responsibility. Busch's mother, Gertrude, was the child of Jewish immigrants from Russia, who settled in Cincinnati.²³ She followed her sisters to

New York, where she met and married Ben Busch. On 23 August 1954, Charles was born, the youngest of three children.

Gertrude's older sister, Lillian, helped the financially struggling Buschs by getting her husband, Louis, to set Ben up with a record store business and buy him a house in Hartsdale, New York.²⁴ In 1962, Gertrude, who had had a fragile constitution, suffered a heart attack and died. Busch was almost eight years old at the time, and remembers:

That night everybody was hushed. Aunt Lillian looked destroyed. She never got over it. The two events that have shaped my life are my mother's death and the opening of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom Off-Broadway . . . my mother's death signalled this change in our lives when my nuclear family disappeared and the effect of that nearly destroyed me as it turned out.²⁵

Ben Busch seems to have been liberated by Gertrude's death. He traveled to Europe with the insurance money, leaving the children in the care of a succession of black housekeepers.

Although Ben may not have been the model of responsibility, Busch remembers his father as great fun--when he was there. The young boy would stay up with his father late into the night, watching old movies on television. At ten years old, Busch had a vast knowledge of old films and was able to rattle off the most esoteric movie trivia for the amusement of his father's friends. Ben also loved opera and would recount the melodramatic plots to his son:

They were like my bedtime stories. They were so romantic and grand and tragic. At seven, my father took me to the Met to see Joan Sutherland in La Sonnambula. I was entranced. I don't remember my mother but I remember Joan Sutherland.²⁶

The years after his mother's death were difficult for Busch. Along with the disruption caused by various relatives moving in and out, to help with the children, Busch had to contend with the growing awareness that his father was, in fact, simply not committed to the care of his children:

In my memory, it seems we were always trying to seduce him, in a sense. My sister [Margaret] and I were always being the coquette with him to keep his interest. We wanted to keep him in the house and we would do impersonations, be funny, to keep him entertained.²⁷

Ben Busch was either unable or unwilling to take on the responsibility of raising his children, and Busch still views his father with a mixture of bitterness and regret:

He was a lot of fun. I just wouldn't want him to take care of my dog if I went on vacation . . . I just felt that he ultimately didn't care was the thing. She [Lillian] made it clear that it was true, and I think I felt it myself, that his emotions were shallow--towards everybody.²⁸

In 1964, two years after Gertrude's death, Lillian legally adopted Charles and Margaret. Ben had by now remarried, and moved out of the house in Hartsdale, leaving the children in the care of Belle, Gertrude's other sister. Charles had become shy and reclusive, with chronic stomach ailments and an addiction to Tums. By the eighth grade he was doing so poorly in school that Lillian was notified he would not be promoted. She brought Charles to New York, where he spent the summer at her Park Avenue apartment, while she tutored him. Lillian remembers that his concentration was so poor that he would fall asleep moments after he opened a book. Since he showed an aptitude for art, she enrolled him in New York City's High School of Music and Art. Eventually, Busch moved in permanently with his aunt, and his grades improved considerably.

Encouraged by Lillian, Busch cut himself off emotionally from his father and made little attempt to contact Ben Busch; in the past twenty-five years, he says he has only called his father three or four times. But much of Busch's aesthetic appreciation can be traced to his father's influence. Ben introduced Charles to the world of melodrama as presented in Hollywood movies of the 30s and 40s and the larger-than-life theatricality of opera. Even if he abandoned his son, Ben still exposed Charles to a land inhabited by glamorous movie stars who gestured grandly and wore ravishing clothes. This was the realm Charles retreated to after his mother died, and it was this highly romantic milieu which always held a strong attraction for him.

The theatre was always Busch's first love.²⁹ Lillian sent him to several summer camps which emphasized theatrical training. At Beginner's Showcase, one of these theatre camps, he met Andy Halliday, a founding member of Theatre-in-Limbo, and they have remained close friends for the past twenty-three years.³⁰ After graduating high school, Busch was accepted by the theatre program at Northwestern University, and enrolled in the fall of 1972.

His roommate during his freshman year was a tall, somewhat overweight (at the time), young man given to tossing off caustic one-liners. His name was Ed Taussig, and although he never became a member of Theatre-in-Limbo, Taussig would become one of the major influences in Busch's creative life, often coming up with titles and one-liners for Busch's plays. One of the few people Busch has turned to for criticism, Taussig acted with him during their college years and, afterwards, gave his support and help on various projects. Their personalities complemented each

other to an extraordinary degree, and their intense friendship has inspired Busch's work from his first production at Northwestern (Sister Act) through the Limbo plays.

Determined to be active in the theatre program, Busch soon found he was unable to get roles in department shows. A fellow student, Kenneth Elliott, who would later become producing director for Theatre-in-Limbo, suggested that Charles was a hard type to cast: very thin and rather fey. Furthermore, he wasn't confident of his ability to project masculinity on the stage. This insecurity never left him, and during his solo years, critics continually pointed to his desultory treatment of male roles.³¹

During the fall semester of his junior year (1974), Busch studied art in Copenhagen. When he returned to Northwestern, his hair was dyed red, and he sported earrings and make up (during this time David Bowie had reached the height of his popularity as an androgynous pop star). Kenneth Elliott found that Charles "cultivated eccentricity. He was wild looking."³² Having come out of the closet with a vengeance, Busch was in the process of constructing a gay identity and defiantly flaunting it. Now the theatre department might reject him but they could not ignore him. He began to forge his new persona with enthusiasm:

A gay identity was so important to me at school. After so many years of being this marginal person without a real personality, suddenly being gay I could identify with. I couldn't identify with being Jewish . . . all the roles in acting class were straight. What was I going to do, play Bo in Bus Stop? This new me I was creating was so much fun that I didn't want to abandon it, even for a scene. I was falling in love with this new person . . . this outrageous queen.³³

After returning from Copenhagen, Busch wrote his first full-length play, Out-takes of a B-Movie. The action takes place in a small shop in Greenwich Village that

specializes in Hollywood memorabilia. Max Zelinski, the salesboy who runs the shop, is constantly visited by a group of eccentrics who have become his family.

Max is described as

a slight boy of eighteen with a face somewhere between the delicate beauty of a silent film ingenue and the battered pugnacity of a seasoned prizefighter.³⁴

The protagonist is a portrait of how Busch saw himself: the lone, androgynous figure, seemingly fragile, but with great resources of inner strength.

Out-takes gives little indication of the direction Busch would take as a playwright. The style is naturalistic, rambling, with little focus or developing action. Characters arbitrarily enter and exit. But the heart of the play, acceptance and integration of self, is one of the major themes running throughout all of Busch's work. Out-takes was chosen for an award by the English Department but on a technicality (Busch wasn't an English major) he couldn't accept it. Nevertheless, he was encouraged to continue writing; this was the first time he had come close to winning a prize for anything.³⁵

A Woman's Picture, also never produced, was written during the fall semester of Busch's senior year. The play's structure shows a marked improvement over Out-takes, and the plot development is more tightly focused. Of A Woman's Picture,

Busch says:

[It] is very much 60s Tennessee Williams, not just naturalism. At that point I was very much influenced by The Mutilated and The Gnädiges Fräulein. The character of Paulette is like Leona in Small Craft Warnings. I was very into Tennessee Williams at the time.³⁶

He also notes that A Woman's Picture is very autobiographical in spirit, if not in fact.

The protagonist is a man (Joey) masquerading as a woman (Paula). Drag is not used here for camp purposes or comic effect, but as a metaphor of the displaced self. Disguising gender reveals the genuine nature of the individual. The feminine gender allows Joey to express his desires and emotional needs freely in public, without censure. He can even fulfill his role as an artist; as "Paula," he actually becomes a movie star. The other characters in the play accept Joey as "Paula," but Joey himself knows that his biological identity can never be revealed without forfeiting his career. To date, this is the only play in which Busch has articulated the pleasure and anxiety drag can cause in the individual dressing up.³⁷ A Woman's Picture becomes a metaphor for the homosexual experience of "passing" in the dominant heterosexual culture, role-playing in order for the marginalized individual to function in the ruling society.

In re-reading the play, Ed Taussig has commented that the piece doesn't sound like Busch at all--it is "too personal."³⁸ For that very reason, it is of interest. The play contains two moments of particular significance in showing Busch's developing attitude toward drag, androgyny, and the gay sensibility. In Act One, scene two, Paula/Joey describes the experience of putting on make-up for the first time:

I . . . felt so plain [as a child] and really transparent. I never said anything to anyone and no one cared why. I used to think I wasn't really alive but that I was the ghost of a little girl who died. When I looked in the mirror, all I saw was silver . . . One day . . . I was all alone in the apartment. My sister who raised me was working in the factory. I was positive that she was buying me a whole stash of movie magazines . . . I hunted all over and decided to check my sister's bureau. I didn't find Photoplay but in her top drawer were all her cosmetics. It was like opening a casket of jewels under the sea. There were false eyelashes, lipsticks, powder, all sorts of rouges and colors. I just had to put it all on. I remember my hands shook so much I had to do my lipstick four times. It was such an amazing feeling, being able to create an entirely different being. I put on so much make-up, I could feel its weight on my

flesh. I stood back and looked at myself in the mirror. I still wasn't there but the face staring back at me was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen . . . She smiled and just looked at me, well, as though she would love me. Now I would never be alone. I fell in love with her.³⁹

When in drag, Busch says he is totally fearless and articulate.⁴⁰ Yet Busch's approach towards drag in A Woman's Picture is atypical of his later work, in which a cross-dressed male actor is intended to be perceived as a female character.

The play ends with Joey accepted, not as Paula, the role he has been playing, but in his true male self. In a quietly moving scene, Steve, a gay man, who has had a stillborn romance with Paula, gently takes off her make-up, eyelashes, dress, bra, and wig, as if he were handling a new born baby. The sequence is a theatrically powerful gender transformation, a re-birth of self. After the two men stare at each other for a moment, Steve opens a suitcase, takes out a shirt and pair of men's pants and gives them to Joey. When Joey is fully dressed, Steve embraces him and they leave. Curtain. In its ability to address issues of sexual identity candidly, A Woman's Picture remains Busch's most personal work to date. But the next plays take a more confident and playful approach toward drag.

Sister Act, the first Busch play to be produced, was the apotheosis of the Busch/Taussig friendship.⁴¹ By this time Busch had pretty much rejected the theatre at Northwestern. He remembers Sister Act as having its genesis as an independent study project in an advanced writing class for Lee Van Dyke. But the play's real origins were in the improvisations Busch and Taussig had been doing since their freshman year. They would think up names of characters and spin out involved sketches about them. Taussig remembers constantly slipping in and out of improvisations. Eventually they came up with recurring characters: Traviata (Busch)

and Mavis (Taussig), for whom they created extensive personal histories. Traviata and Mavis were Brooklyn shop girls who had climbed up the social ladder through a series of marriages; theirs was a seedy past veneered with a layer of upper class manner. The circumstances allowed for the constant switch between disguise and revelation, grand affectation and straightforward vulgarity. The incongruity, exaggeration, and role-playing were all features of camp, and, of course, Traviata and Mavis were classic camp creations. Sister Act was, in fact, the first time Busch used a camp sensibility to explore the themes of role playing he had examined in A Woman's Picture. This show marked his debut as a drag performer.

Busch cast Sister Act with friends, none of whom were in the theatre department. They began rehearsals, with Busch directing, although they had no place to perform. Eventually, Scott Blakeman, a friend who ran a film series called Midnight Madness, offered them a slot on Friday and Saturday night at 11:30, when a scheduled film became unavailable. They were given a small budget, one hundred dollars, and a curtain raiser, Lena and the Goat, by fellow student Alan Pulner, was added.

Sister Act took place in a communal women's dressing room at a fairground. Busch and Taussig were Esther and Hester, a pair of siamese twins, which were based on the characters of Traviata and Mavis. There is a loose, improvisatory air to the play, with little plot to propel the action forward. Characters enter, interact, trade quips with each other, and leave. The core of the piece is the relationship between the twins. Esther (Busch) attempts to gain respectability, while Hester (Taussig) rejects society and sabotages the other's efforts by her outrageous, provocative

behavior. Ultimately, Esther and Hester must accept each other--convention versus the outlaw--because they are literally joined at the hip. The following exchange was cut by Busch before opening because he felt it was verbalizing sub-text, but it appears in the manuscript of the play and contains what Taussig calls "an absolute policy statement of the two sides of our personality."⁴²

Esther. (Busch) Oh, Hester, haven't you ever dreamed about fitting in, belonging to the rest of the world and not just this little shell we call "our life?" Wouldn't you like to have people want to be your friend because they think you're a good person and not because you're so bizarre. Oh God, sometimes I wish I was invisible and never have someone stare at me again.

Hester. (Taussig) Esther, I want people to stare at us. Sometimes they laugh, a lot of times they're horror stricken but they don't pass us by. We really shake 'em up good and I like that. People need us Esther. I mean, when we're on stage I look at that crowd and I think "here we are babies, there are such things in the world. All you future mommies and daddies out there, someday you may have kids like us. There's always that chance so you better get used to it now."⁴³

This conflict between convention and provocation would continue to manifest itself during Busch's career. His aesthetic choices were always subject to an internal struggle between experimentation that risked offense and audience approval.⁴⁴

On 27 February 1976, the day Sister Act was to open, the front page of the Daily Northwestern blazed with the headline, "Degeneracy to reign at Midnight Madness." There was a photograph of Busch and Taussig sporting wigs, make-up, and one feather boa wrapped around both their necks. Their interview ended with Busch's warning that "the plays are not for everybody . . . so members of the audience should come prepared to see anything."⁴⁵

Northwestern was a very conservative campus at that time.⁴⁶ Busch was afraid of the reaction, not only to the play but to the article in the campus paper. Ed Taussig describes the opening night:

We were terrified . . . we had expected rotten eggs to be thrown at us . . . Here we were, dressed to the nines, big, red, afro wigs with feathers in our hair, wheeled on a tarted-up piano bench on a dolly, wheeled out in total darkness, there were no house lights on, no stage lights on, so we were wheeled out literally by some of the other cast members because there was nobody else working the show. And the lights went on, a spot hit us, and a roar went up in the audience, and it was the roar of laughter and of acceptance . . . finally! My god, it was so moving. Finally we were on stage. And we knew at that minute that we had done the right thing. It was like an affirmation of all the years we had spent being in this outcast status of not getting the mainstream roles and being pariahs on campus. When the lights went on in Sister Act it was . . . a re-affirmation of who we were. It was the first 'yes' that he [Busch] got in performance.⁴⁷

Sister Act probably reads better than it played; Taussig felt the rest of the cast had no idea of the style Busch was promoting, which included the irony, incongruity, self-deprecation, and artifice that was the basis of camp. All the staples of Limbo plays were evident in Sister Act: the combination of broad comedy and snappy repartee, high versus low status, the comic tension developed between pretension and vulgarity, and of course, role playing. But the cast was simply not up to the style demanded by the material.⁴⁸

Taussig does not see a strong influence of Charles Ludlam on the work. There is no intertextual allusion in the play, a technique which Ludlam often used, and which Busch would later employ for his genre parodies. In fact, Sister Act is far more naturalistic than most Ludlam plays, even though the characters' behavior is theatrically heightened. However, Busch states that he could not have written Sister Act without having seen Eunuchs of the Forbidden City, Ludlam's epic treatment of the last Empress of China, which played at Theater for the New City in the spring of 1972. This was Busch's first exposure to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, and he was inspired by Ludlam's use of drag and acting style, which could be almost

operatic in quality. Ludlam has said, "I love the incredibly inflated theatricality, the preposterousness of opera."⁴⁹ In speaking of Sister Act during an interview for this study, Busch echoed Ludlam's sentiments:

heightened emotions, heightened speech . . . an emotional intensity that's almost too emotional for the scene, almost an operatic style of acting. Sister Act is almost, but not quite like Ludlam. It's not based on any genre, but it is like Ludlam in the use of drag and the bigger-than-life performance.⁵⁰

Eunuchs of the Forbidden City had demonstrated to Busch that decadent spectacle and drag could be combined to create a dazzling theatrical experience. Until then, Busch had been exposed only to the traditional theatrical fare of Broadway. Ludlam showed him artistic options beyond New York commercial theatre.

In the spring of 1976, just before Busch's graduation, Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company came to Chicago, under the auspices of the University of Chicago. Busch and Taussig saw the troupe and, afterwards, introduced themselves and spent the evening with them.⁵¹ This began Busch's relationship with Ludlam, which would be renewed when he returned to New York two years later and played Hollywood Confidential at Ludlam's theatre.

After graduation from college, Busch was not quite sure how to proceed with his career. He fantasized about having his own company, like Ludlam, and writing and creating roles for himself. He returned to New York, stayed a week, and after finding out that Ed Taussig had remained in Chicago, moved back to be with his friend. His plan was to write plays for Ed and himself. The first attempt was called Barging Down the Nile, or 'E Gypped Me. Taussig supplied the title, an assignment he would fulfill for several other Busch works, including Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, which contributed a large share to its record breaking run.⁵² Barging

Down the Nile was to be a farce about two girls who were movie extras on a biblical epic filming in Hollywood in the 1950's. The female star of the film was actually a man in drag (similar to A Woman's Picture), a secret that the two extras found out. Only one scene was ever written, now apparently lost.⁵³

In searching for a suitable vehicle for Taussig and himself, Busch came across John Van Druten's Old Acquaintance, a Broadway play which eventually became a film starring Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins. Busch wrote a forty minute spoof called Old Coozies, subtitled "a society comedy." The program stated that it was "very loosely adapted" from Van Druten. Busch's version spanned thirty-eight years, tracing the careers and friendship of two writers, Kit Marlowe (Busch) and Milly Watson Drake (Taussig), with Busch again the lady with pretensions and Taussig the vulgarian. Billing themselves as the Van Allen sisters (Mavis and Elsa), they opened at La Mere Vipere, a club with a punk rock/gay clientele, on 17 November 1976. Busch recalls that the audience responded warmly:

I thought maybe I could do something like this [drag performance]. I'm certainly more proficient today but [my technique] was basically there.⁵⁴

Although no tape of the performances seems to exist, the manuscript of Old Coozies reveals neither the imagery and emotional depth of A Woman's Picture nor the outrageous humor of Sister Act. The format was sketch comedy--sometimes witty, often crude.

While appearing at the Drama Shelter in a production of Sartre's The Flies in the winter of 1976, Busch became friendly with cast member Christine Coyle. Coyle had recently graduated from Northern Illinois University and wanted to be a director.

Charles approached her, as well as several other cast members, about forming a company:

I told them I had a fantasy of having a theatrical company doing these very theatrical parody plays--campy theatre. I basically wanted it to be the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, let's just say it . . . Christine wanted to direct. I didn't really want to direct, but I wanted to star and write . . . I was artistic director of the company and she was the director of plays.⁵⁵

The Imitation of Life company was incorporated as a non-profit theatre company on 15 July 1977. Busch had written a new play, The Fall of the Theatre of Evil, or Teethmarks!, and wanted his new company to produce it.

What makes Teethmarks! fascinating is that various settings, situations, even names, end up in Vampire Lesbians of Sodom seven years later. The popular story of how Vampire Lesbians was written recounts how Busch wrote the play in several hours after he and Elliott had gotten a booking at the Limbo Lounge (March 1984).⁵⁶ Actually Vampire Lesbians was written at least six months prior to that date, at which time Busch and Elliott had not even heard of the Limbo Lounge.⁵⁷ And Teethmarks!, an early vampire play experiment, pre-dates Vampire Lesbians by a good six years.

Teethmarks! chronicles the rivalry between the legendary grande dame of the Theatre of Evil, Mme. Camille Astarte, and Mlle. Lysette Chesnet, a younger actress and current toast of Paris. Busch was to have played the older actress, Astarte. In Vampire Lesbians, also about the ongoing rivalry of two divas who happen to be vampires, Busch would play the younger rival but retain the name of Astarte. Both plays, like Sister Act and Old Coozies, deal with a combative relationship that is eventually reconciled. Cries of banshees, vampire hunters, and vampire flunkies

occur in both Teethmarks! and Vampire Lesbians. Most striking is a comparison of the final scene of each play.

In Teethmarks!, Camille and Lysette wind up in the New York of 1967, auditioning for a rock musical. In the final moments, Camille (Busch) leaves the theatre to meet her final destruction--garlic, wolf-bane, and crosses don't destroy the Busch vampire, but encroaching time and the modern materialistic world do. The younger vampire is left to rehearse her rock number with the choreographer as the wail of the banshee is heard signalling Camille's destruction.

The final scene in Vampire Lesbians is changed from Broadway to contemporary Las Vegas. Both vampires survive (this is a comedy), and the curtain comes down on a reconciliation as they rehearse a dance step and chatter gaily about a career comeback over the triumphant notes of the overture to Gypsy. Teethmarks! owes more to nineteenth century melodrama with its tirades, villains, near escapes, spectacle, and lavish costumes, while Vampire Lesbians consists of three loosely connected sketches, linked only by the recurring characters of the two divas (whose personalities actually change from scene to scene). But the similarities between the plays show that the genesis of the latter was of a far more extended nature than articles and interviews published in the press suggest.

The economic problems of producing Teethmarks! with its elaborate sets and costumes prompted Busch to write Myrtle Pope, a play that could be cheaply mounted in bars, as he had done with Old Coozies:

It was very much my vehicle. It was patterned on Madame X and I got to play with little bits of all these movies like Now, Voyager, A Stolen Life, The Hard Way, Dead Ringer, and Mildred Pierce. It was like all these woman's pictures rolled into one.⁵⁸

The first performance of Myrtle Pope: the Story of a Woman Possessed took place on 27 July at La Mere Vipere, where Old Coozies had been produced. Subsequent performances took place on 3 and 10 August.

The plot concerns yet another pair of twins. Pretty Veda and ugly Vera (Busch) vie for the same man. Vera has a breakdown, is shipped off to a Swiss asylum, returns transformed into a beauty, and accidentally kills her sister. Vera takes her sister's place (now that Vera is beautiful, they are identical twins). Vera's ruse is eventually discovered by a blackmailer. She runs away to protect her husband and young son and has a series of affairs as she descends into a life of debauchery. As plot elements from Madame X collide with those of Mildred Pierce, Vera (now called Myrtle Pope) finds that her daughter is in love with her son from a former marriage. She tries to kill herself but is saved by her son--who does not know she is his mother.

Myrtle Pope is genre parody, as the Limbo shows would be. The play is a collage of masochistic women's roles in Hollywood films played by Joan Crawford and Bette Davis. In the performance version, the narrator is an older Myrtle, played by an actress, with Busch as the younger Myrtle, who plays the flashback scenes.⁵⁹

The narrative is overlong and turgid, although some of the dialogue, cited from the audio taped performance, is wonderfully evocative of cheap movie melodrama:

*Vera. (to her husband) I'm a midnight girl in a nine o'clock town.*⁶⁰

Vera/Myrtle. (to gangster Johnny La Fountain) Who are you to tell me what to drink, you low down bargain basement hood. (He laughs and starts to leave.) You know Johnny, you'll never hit the big time because you're small time in your heart! (He turns around and starts to advance on her menacingly.) No Johnny, you wouldn't. I was only joking, Johnny. I was just cracking wise. No, Johnny, don't. (He is about to belt her but stops. She collapses on the floor, holding on to

his leg.) Johnny, you can't go on treating me this way. I can't bear riding on this merry-go-round that you call living.⁶¹

As examples of Busch's penchant for re-cycling, character names in Myrtle Pope will be re-introduced in later plays: Magda Legerdemain would turn up as Busch's nemesis in scene two of Vampire Lesbians, Johnny La Fontaine modified into Chick LaFountain in Times Square Angel (1984).

In Myrtle Pope, Busch began to experiment with androgyny and gender identity. As Myrtle, Busch played a love scene with an actress, dressed in a tuxedo. At one point they kissed passionately. He remembers that an audible gasp could be heard from the audience, who saw two women making love. He would later use this same strategy for Theatre-in-Limbo's Coma, when two female characters (one, a man in drag) play a similar love scene.

Along with his exploration of androgyny, Busch began to appreciate the power of drag to deconstruct cultural ideologies:

With a man playing this masochistic heroine, it really points out how ludicrous these female roles actually are--what's totally acceptable in real life and in theatre or film for a woman seems totally insane when performed by a man. Drag really has a wonderful political and poetic potential.⁶²

Kenneth Elliott remembers Busch in Myrtle Pope as fun and diverting. Andy

Halliday, however, who traveled to Chicago to see it, felt that

if it were done here [New York], it would have been like the East Village and considered very bad theatre. Nothing quite worked yet. Charles didn't quite know what to do yet. I helped him with the story. Charles still hadn't found his voice in Myrtle Pope. He wanted to be in drag, but he was just overacting. There was no focus.⁶³

An audio taped performance of Myrtle Pope bears out much of Halliday's criticism.

Of course, this evidence is hardly a complete record of a theatrical performance.

Visual business, body movement, gestures, and facial expressions are lost. But timing, vocal characterization, and an impression of audience response are preserved and give a substantial, if incomplete picture. With this particular performance of Myrtle Pope, Busch is the only performer getting laughs. The other characterizations range from stiff and mechanical to painfully amateurish. There is no common agreement about the style of the piece. Other than Busch, there appears to be no love for the genre being parodied, in fact, no knowledge of the genre itself. This is Busch's earliest recorded work, and it is clear that he has a good deal to learn. His ability to set up a laugh, to play to a particular house and adjust his performance, his talent for creating a mosaic of performance references (from Davis to Bankhead to Stanwyck to Shearer) are still in the formative stages. Yet, he is without doubt giving the most skillful performance in the cast.

Even though Myrtle Pope was directed with little restraint or understanding for the material, it was well received at La Mere Vipere, and Busch and Coyle began booking it in other clubs and bars. They did a performance at a gay bar called Le Pub, and the audience responded enthusiastically. They knew the source material that was being parodied, they appreciated the camp humor, and they enjoyed Busch in drag. After the show Christine told Busch that he was overplaying:

Perhaps I was, but it was a watershed night for me. I had always wanted to be a tour de force performer and that night I was--more than a normal actor, I wanted to be dynamic, the kind of performer who could electrify an audience, a star performer, out there, big emotions, slay an audience. I wanted to be Bernhardt. I wanted to devastate an audience, not just have them enjoy the performance.⁶⁴

Yet Busch did not need a gay audience for a successful performance. Although straight audiences might not get all the movie references or react as knowingly to the

camp treatment, they responded to the power of the narrative--as they would with the later Limbo plays. Busch remembers playing Myrtle Pope in a straight comedy club:

I arrived in drag. I could hear this horrible, beer drinking audience. I thought I was going to be lynched. Christine got up and said, "What you are going to see is a little different, it's a play." Well, they really got into it. It was like playing the wild west. It was melodrama and they really got into it. When I was going to shoot the gangster they were yelling, "Kill him! Kill him!!"⁶⁵

Myrtle Pope played intermittently for about six months. After La Mere Vipere, there were performances in other Chicago nightspots; the longest run being at the Village Theatre, a movie house where they played every weekend for a month. Busch believes that there was a total of about forty performances.

During the run, relations between Busch and the company continued to deteriorate. He was unhappy with the actors, who never seemed to master the style, and with Christine, who according to Busch, didn't trust the material and staged it like a three ring circus. The company, in turn, resented Busch for getting all the audience attention and were not sympathetic to his work in drag. Busch tried to salvage the situation:

I came up with another idea for a play--Loose Cookies--Ed Taussig again came up with that name. It was going to be a Snake Pit parody, more of an ensemble piece to get them off my back. But it didn't get too far, I never wrote it. We even tried to do improvs and I would take the best lines for the play, but they came up with terrible lines. Christine Hines [a company actress] was always complaining that they weren't going to be taken seriously because I was in drag. I was holding them back. Well, I was the one who gave them the idea for a company. I was crushed. They thought the movie parodies were superficial. I felt like I didn't belong. I wasn't part of them.⁶⁶

One night the actors turned on Busch, letting out all the pent-up frustration and resentment of the past several months. They told Busch he was selfish, egocentric,

and ungiving. Without further evidence, it becomes difficult to state how truthful the company's allegations were. However, certain conclusions can be safely drawn. Clearly, Christine Coyle and the actors had their own agenda, which came into conflict with Busch's plan for the company. According to Busch, they were uncomfortable with drag performance and had little affinity with the material he was writing for them. They made it clear that they did not want to appear exclusively in his plays and wanted a more traditional repertoire. Most importantly, unlike the Theatre-in-Limbo actors, they were unwilling to grant the power to a fellow actor which would make him the star of the company. This element alone is probably the most important factor in what kept Limbo a functioning company for seven years.

Busch was traumatized by the actors turning against him. He perceived the event as a massive betrayal and decided to go back to New York and resume his career there. Although he wrote notes for a new play, Hollywood Confidential, which would have been mounted by the company, he now vowed he would never put himself in the position of depending on a company again; he would write Hollywood Confidential as a vehicle for himself--and he would play all the parts. During January, February, and March he completed the script. The play was massive and ran two and a half hours at an invited reading Busch gave for his friends before leaving Chicago. He wasn't quite sure how he would perform the play as a solo piece, but he felt it could be done.

Busch returned to New York in the spring of 1978. Having left a fledgling theatre company, he left drag, as well. For the next six years, until that April night

in 1984 at the Limbo Lounge, Charles Busch pursued a career as a solo performer, out of drag. Now he would face the audience alone.

NOTES

1. See, for example Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1990); Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1980); Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1992); Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Robert J. Stoller, Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1968).
2. Herbert Muschamp, "Vogue Arts: Performance," Vogue, December 1991, 134,
3. For historical studies of cross-dressing in the theatre see Roger Baker, Drag: A History of Female Impersonation on the Stage (London: Triton Books, 1968); and Anthony Slide, Great Pretenders (Lombard, Illinois: Wallace-Homestead, 1986).
4. Bruce Rodgers, Gay Talk (New York: Paragon Books, 1979), 93-94. This is the definitive dictionary of gay slang. Rodgers traces the etymology of "gay" to the sixteenth century French word gaie, meaning a homosexual man. The justification for its use in this study, rather than "homosexual," has been stated by Joseph P. Goodwin in More Man Than You'll Ever Be (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989), an examination of gay folklore and acculturation in Middle America:

Occasional homosexual acts may be performed by heterosexual people. *Gay*, however . . . extends beyond mere sexual aspects of life (xii).
5. The emphasis in this study is on female impersonation. No slight is intended to female artists such as Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of Split Britches, who have also presented fascinating works in which male drag is used to great effect.
6. "Goings on about Town: Theatre," New Yorker, 21 May 1990. According to this column, Vampires passed Jack Hefner's Vanities (one thousand, seven hundred and eighty five performances), and The Blacks by Jean Genet (one thousand, four hundred and eight performances).
7. In 1991, at the time Theatre-in-Limbo was presenting Red Scare on Sunset, another hit Off-Broadway production, Pageant, was running, which featured a cast of cross-dressed beauty contestants. Lypsinka had a successful run Off-Broadway, and soon the Ridiculous Theatrical Company would present Georg Osterman's Brother Truckers (1992), with Everett Quinton and Georg Osterman in drag. Other examples of the burgeoning phenomenon of drag included the critically acclaimed film, Paris is

Burning (1991), a documentary about drag balls in Harlem, which was cited by the New York Film Critics. Cross-dressing even infiltrated television, when John Cleese, in a post-Monty Python appearance, performed in drag for an American Express commercial.

8. John M. Clum, Acting Gay: Male Homosexuality in Modern Drama (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), xii. Clum is speaking of "post-Stonewall drama," drama written after 28 June 1969. On this date police raided the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in the West Village, and were met with open resistance. Many Gay studies scholars use this incident as a symbolic marker for the beginnings of Gay liberation. See also Nicholas de Jongh, Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage (London: Routledge, 1992).

9. The following authors have been extremely helpful in focusing and clarifying the definition of camp as used in this study: Jack Babuscio, "The Cinema of Camp," in Gay Roots: Twenty Years of 'Gay Sunshine', ed. Winston Leyland (San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press), 431-449; Michael Bronski, Culture Clash: the Making of Gay Sensibility (Boston: South End Press, 1984); Jonathan Dollimore, Sexual Dissidence (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: St. Martins Press, 1986); Esther Newton, Mother Camp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in A Susan Sontag Reader (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 105-119.

10. Andrew Ross, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture (New York: Routledge, 1989), 137. Even critics such as Ross, who deny that camp is a "privileged expression" of one particular group, note that the gay, pre-Stonewall subculture has the strongest claim.

11. Babuscio, 431.

12. Lawrence Grossberg, "The Affective Sensibility of Fandom," in The Adoring Audience, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 54.

13. Babuscio, 432.

14. Ibid., 437.

15. Bronski, 6.

16. For a view of camp as a product of self-presentation, rather than of sensibility, see Mark Booth, Camp, (London: Quartet Books, 1983).

17. Dyer, 178.

18. Charles Busch, interview by author, tape recording, 7 August 1991,

19. Dollimore, 311-312.

20. Charles Busch, interview by author, tape recording, 31 July 1991.

21. Ross, 157.

22. Bronski, 95.

23. The following account of Charles's youth is gleaned from a series of recorded interviews with Busch himself and one extended meeting with his aunt, Lillian Blum (31 January 1992). At the time of her interview, Mrs. Blum was 83 years old and recovering from an illness, but she was bright and articulate. After a few minutes of conversation, the similarities in the stories she and Busch told became strikingly apparent. Busch freely admits:

I get these stories from Aunt Lillian, second hand. They're her interpretation. They're like Balzac, moral tales of evil and selfishness. That's why my plays are simple stories of faith--decadents get punished and the good get rewarded. Lillian was a wonderful storyteller. She'd tell the same story over and over. She was so biased! Her side of the family was like Little Women: full of self-sacrifice. My father's side were all out of The Little Foxes: total self-absorption and selfishness (interview, 9 July 1991).

Busch's close friend, Ed Taussig, observes that Busch and Lillian love to embellish their stories. The author has tried to adhere to factual evidence.

24. The Buschs moved to Hartsdale in 1960. According to Lillian, Ben Busch was only required to pay utilities on the Hartsdale house. Lillian and her husband, Louis Blum, took care of the mortgage.

25. Charles Busch, interview by author, 9 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.

26. Ibid.

27. Charles Busch, interview by author, 10 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.

28. Busch, interview, 10 July 1991.

29. Busch would later take advantage of his artistic abilities when he helped support himself by being a quick sketch artist at the Renaissance Fair in Tuxedo Park, New York (see Chapter Two).

30. Although Busch and Halliday were initially cool towards each other when they met at Beginner's Showcase (summer 1969), that winter, they found themselves in the same acting workshop, run by Jack Romano, who had taught them at camp. Busch and Halliday discovered a shared love of old Hollywood films. While in Romano's second class, they made several attempts to write a play together. They completed

one, Dance Your Heart Away, a sort of ersatz Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland MGM musical. Busch was fifteen at the time; Halliday was a year older.

31. Robert Coe, "Smarm and Drag," Village Voice, 18 September 1978. In reviewing Hollywood Confidential, Busch's first solo piece, Coe notes that "none of his male characters inspire him." Coe's observation was echoed by many other critics, and as a result, Busch began to emphasize the female characters in his solo work. Although the last solo pieces he wrote, Après Moi, le Deluge and Reed, were male monologues, both characters were gay, the former flamboyantly so, which no doubt, made him more comfortable in performance.

32. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 6 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

33. Charles Busch, interview by author, 17 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.

34. Charles Busch, "Out-takes of a 'B' Movie, 1975" TMs [photocopy], p. 1, property of author, New York City.

35. Busch submitted Out-takes to several theatre companies at this time. Interest was expressed by the New York Shakespeare Festival, Circle Repertory Company, and St. Nicholas Theatre Company, but no production was forthcoming, and Busch went on to other projects.

36. Busch, interview, 17 July 1991.

37. In Red Scare on Sunset (1991) there is an elliptical reference to Busch's position as a drag artist (see Chapter Seven). In 1992, Busch began work on a new play, Divina, which told the story of a down-and-out drag queen (see Conclusion).

38. Ed Taussig, interview by author, 28 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.

39. Charles Busch, "A Woman's Picture, 1975," TMs [photocopy], 1-2-4, property of author, New York City.

40. Drag functions as a mask that liberates the actor. Charles Ludlam states a similar reaction on his first appearance in drag (Screen Test, 1966), when he states, "the disguise, the costume, freed me, made me do things I could never have done myself" (Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Ridiculous," New Yorker, 15 November 1976, 67).

41. Although Sister Act marks the first time Busch had appeared on stage in drag, he had gone to a party for cross-dressers in his junior year, after returning from Copenhagen. As is often the case with transvestites, the guests were straight as well as gay. Busch quickly became bored. He states that "just to dress up as a lady didn't

do anything for me. There has to be a role in my imagination, there has to be something else, a theatrical thing." (New York City, 5 October 1991).

42. Ed Taussig, interview, 28 September 1991.

43. Charles Busch, "Sister Act, 1976," TMs [photocopy], p. 10, property of author, New York City. Ed Taussig states this manuscript is incomplete and that lines and pieces of business are missing. According to Busch, it is the only manuscript of Sister Act in his possession. Unfortunately, Taussig has lost his copy of the script.

44. The struggle would reveal itself most conspicuously during Red Scare on Sunset, the Limbo comedy in which Busch began to address political issues (see Chapter Seven).

45. Tom Lavell, "Degeneracy to reign at Midnight Madness," Daily Northwestern, 27 February 1976.

46. Many of the members of Theatre-in-Limbo went to Northwestern during this time and, when interviewed, they all agreed that the performance in Sister Act took no small amount of courage on the part of Busch and Taussig, given the atmosphere of conservatism on the campus.

47. Ed Taussig, interview, 23 September 1991.

48. Sister Act was performed two more times, off-campus, at the Puppet Place, the following 21, 22 May. Busch called it a disaster. The stage was very small, and the actors kept bumping into each other. The audiences were even smaller. There have been no other performances.

49. Calvin Tomkins, "Profiles: Ridiculous," The New Yorker, 15 November 1976, 98.

50. Charles Busch, interview, 17 July 1991.

51. The company was doing Camille and Stage Blood. Between afternoon and evening performances they held a workshop, which consisted of a question and answer session. Busch and Taussig attended the workshop, and when Busch gave his opinion on drag, Ludlam was intrigued by his articulate manner. After the workshop, Busch and Taussig met Ludlam and the troupe:

Georg Osterman was more our age than the rest of the company, and he kind of got a kick out of us. He told us to come to the show and stick around afterwards and go to the cast party with them, the closing night party. We helped them strike the set, and I had to pack away the Camille gown. I was so thrilled to be holding the dress that I had seen him wear so often. I think he saw me. Seemed like All About Eve (Busch, interview, 6 August 1991).

52. For discussion of how title contributed to Vampires long run, see Chapter Four.

53. Another manuscript found in Busch's files is Travelogue, a seventeen page one act play. There is no date on the manuscript and Busch believes it was written right after Old Coozies in the fall of 1976. The setting is a bar in Copenhagen. The style is close to Out-takes of a B-Movie, naturalistic, for the most part. With almost no plot, the play is little more than a character study of several patrons of the bar and is, no doubt, inspired by Busch's sojourn in Copenhagen. In all probability this play was written while Busch was still in school, possibly in the spring or fall of 1976, before Sister Act. There is no drag element, nor is the emphasis on comedy. Although never produced, it might have been intended as part of a bill of one acts.

54. Charles Busch, interview by author, 1 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

55. Ibid.

56. Michael Kuchwara, "Camp Followers Flocking to Comedy Hit," Sunday World-Herald (Omaha), 13 October 1985, 29. Busch states in this article, as well as others, that an early draft of Vampire Lesbians took about one hour and twenty minutes to write. Given the length of the first draft, this would have been extremely difficult to accomplish. Busch implies that the play was written specifically to be performed at the old Limbo Lounge, which was not the case.

57. See chapter two for discussion of development of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom.

58. Charles Busch, interview, 1 August 1991.

59. The surviving manuscript differs greatly from an audio tape of the show taken during a performance. In the manuscript version, continuity is achieved by a narrator, Myrtle Pope's maid Ida, a faithful retainer who follows her employer as she descends into depravity. A running gag in the manuscript involves Myrtle continually ordering Ida to pack her things when a situation becomes threatening. Eventually, Ida doesn't even need to be told. As a new crisis occurs, she just comes onstage with packed bags in hand. This "bit" is cut for the taped performance.

60. Charles Busch, Myrtle Pope, 1977, audio cassette, property of author, New York City. Busch appropriated this line from a Warner Brothers ad describing the Bette Davis camp classic Beyond the Forest (1949).

61. Transcript taken from audio cassette previously cited and manuscript version ("Myrtle Pope, 1977, TMs [photocopy], p. 32, property of author, New York City).

62. Rick Reed, "Big Time for the Busch League," The Advocate, 22 February 1979.

63. Andy Halliday, interview by author, 7 April 1991, tape recording, New York City.

64. Charles Busch, interview, 1 August 1991.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

ALONE WITH A CAST OF THOUSANDS

As a result of his work with Theatre-in-Limbo, Charles Busch is best known as a writer of genre parodies, in which, as critic Stephen Holden has recently noted, "almost everything has a show business reference."¹ Moreover, his plays are filled with a camp sensibility, performed by a company which has been described as a "a kind of Mercury Theatre of camp."² But prior to 1984 and his involvement with Limbo, Busch pursued a six year career as a solo performer, writing monologues and complex narratives in a variety of styles. Little critical attention has been paid to Busch's creative output during this period, although the solo pieces indicate that he is a far more versatile playwright than the Limbo comedies suggest. And while his skill as a comedian is evident in his drag impersonations, his solo performance pieces reveal a depth that is only hinted at in the Limbo characterizations.³

The chronicle of Busch and his solo career is also the story of four directors, Patrick Brafford, Peter Napolitano, Ron Vigneau, and Kenneth Elliott. These men not only staged Busch's one-man shows, but collaborated in varying degrees on the material, suggested subjects, modified structure, even co-wrote the script. Busch's relationships with his directors were intense, consuming partnerships. Napolitano said he spent 60% of his time with Busch during the period they were working together. Elliott not only worked with Busch but shared an apartment with him as well, during the first seven years of their collaboration on one-man shows and Theatre-in-Limbo

productions. Vigneau's working relationship with Busch was relatively brief, but he too, influenced Busch's development.

The search for a director began in the spring of 1978 when Busch returned to New York with the manuscript of Hollywood Confidential. Ed Taussig, already settled in New York, had a roommate, Patrick Brafford, who was trying to get his directing career off the ground. Brafford agreed to work with Busch, and helped him cut the playing time down from several hours to forty five minutes.

Hollywood Confidential is cast in the mold of Old Coozies and Myrtle Pope, a genre parody with frequent intertextual allusions to Hollywood films of the "classic" era, 1930-1960.⁴ The play opens with a cub reporter for the tabloid Hollywood Confidential informing us that the legendary film star Lola Lamé (also known as Erna Mae Gruber) is presumed dead--the victim of a fire at a popular gay disco, where she was making a personal appearance. The reporter uncovers Lola's life story by talking in turn to her first husband (Otto, the film director who discovered her), her second husband (Cansino Del Rita, a costume designer hiding a "shameful secret"--he's gay), along with a gossip columnist and various other characters. In a circuitous flashback structure, reminiscent of films like Citizen Kane and The Bad and the Beautiful, Hollywood Confidential tells the rise, fall, and comeback of a Hollywood superstar, making use of a myriad of show business clichés, spliced and intertwined into a dense narrative.

Hollywood Confidential had nineteen characters, although most scenes involved only two or three.⁵ In performance, narrative clarity was of utmost importance. From a class in oral interpretation at Northwestern, Busch had learned

the technique of giving each character a different focus. He would talk in a different direction to clarify who was speaking, and who was being addressed:

It was very tricky too, because you had to make some sort of sense of where you placed people. Clarity was the important thing always. I could be Lola talking to Otto and looking at him to the left, and I'd walk stage right, but I'd have to keep focusing on Otto stage left. Then I'd turn into somebody else, and I'd have to focus straight out front. It was very complicated. It was like mime. If there was a second that people didn't know who I was, or who I was talking to, the scene was lost.⁶

Busch credits Brafford with helping him conceive the form that would be modified and polished throughout the rest of his solo career. None of the solo pieces used an omniscient narrator; the action developed by characters either relating a story or interacting with each other. Busch developed a physical vocabulary of body adjustments (spinning around, sitting and standing, altering a stance) to denote a character transformation.⁷ Brafford added props, hats, and several wigs to help differentiate individuals.

On 9 July 1978, Hollywood Confidential opened at Scene One, a store front cabaret in the West Village. During his solo career, Busch always found his own bookings. He was also his own publicist, and managed to get a good deal of press coverage, considering he was an unknown--there was even a mention in the New York Times (8 July 1978) for his opening at Scene One.

Busch went on a campaign to get Charles Ludlam to see him. With Andy Halliday's help, he pasted up flyers for his Scene One performances all over the city. One day, he ran into Black-Eyed Susan (Susan Carlson), a member of Ludlam's troupe, whom he had met while the company was performing at the University of Chicago in 1976. Busch gave her a stack of flyers to bring to Ludlam's theatre at

One Sheridan Square.⁸ He also wrote a letter to Ludlam, reminding him of their meeting in Chicago and invited him to the show.

On Sunday, July 9th, Busch made his New York debut at Scene One--with shows at 10 p.m. and midnight (Ludlam didn't come). After a brief stint at the Bushes, he was back at Scene One. One night before the show, Ed Taussig rushed backstage to inform Busch that Ludlam and Everett Quinton were in the audience. When they didn't come backstage after the show, Busch was disappointed but not defeated. He saw a flyer on the street, announcing that Ludlam was to be honored at the New York Comedy Awards held at the Blue Hawaii Restaurant on West 15th Street. With Ed Taussig and his sister Margaret in tow, Busch went to the awards dinner, maneuvered his party to a table next to Ludlam, and introduced himself:

Ludlam said, oh, you were those two crazy kids from Chicago, and I said yes, you saw my show the other night, and he said, I never come backstage, but you were terrific, what are you going to do next? I said I was going to play more of these clubs, and he said in my theatre we have so many dark times, you should do your show as a late show in my theatre, and we'll publicize it. I went back to my table, and I said I just couldn't believe he said I could do my show at his theatre! We were just astonished. It was ironic that years later they gave me an award when Vampire Lesbians of Sodom opened, which Charles Ludlam gave to me.⁹

Ludlam told Busch he could open in several weeks and play on Friday and Saturday evenings at 11 p.m., after the regular performance. Busch was ecstatic. Not only did he feel that presenting Hollywood Confidential under the aegis of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company would legitimize him as a performer, but he felt certain there would be a built-in audience who would stay for his show after seeing Ludlam's plays. Neither assumption proved to be the case.

One night Busch went backstage to ask Ludlam when he could get into the theatre to rehearse. Ludlam stared blankly at him, and Busch realized, to his horror, that Ludlam had completely forgotten about his invitation. The next morning, Kathy Smith, the company's business manager, explained to Busch that it would be economically impossible to do the show. Busch was in a panic; he had sent out flyers, press releases, even booked himself on the Joe Franklin Show on television. He pleaded with Kathy Smith to just let him have the theatre space. He would supply the personnel to run the box office, lights, and sound.¹⁰ Smith agreed, and Busch assembled his running crew; Ed Taussig did box office, Andy Halliday ran sound, and Larry Eichler ran the lights. Patrick Brafford was there to help, as well.

For the production at One Sheridan Square, Brafford added a minimal set, consisting of several pieces of furniture to define playing areas: a dressing screen was placed center stage, the reporter's area with typewriter and chair was stage right, and a chaise lounge was placed stage left to indicate Lola's apartment.¹¹ As the play opened Busch wore a white shirt and black pants. For the reporter he wore a fedora and trenchcoat:

The first time I changed into a girl (Erna), I went behind this screen, and changed into a frizzy, red wig and peeked out, and I was her. When I did the big transformation as Lola Lane, I went behind the screen. I came out and I had rolled off the black pants which were elasticized, and I had these gold lame pants underneath. I put a platinum blonde wig on and a boa, so I was very much in full drag, although my make-up was generalized, sort of androgynous. As the gossip columnist, I put on a hat and a fur piece.¹²

Ludlam urged his company to see the opening night performance. Among those in the audience was Peter Napolitano, an NYU student who was an apprentice with the

company. Napolitano liked Hollywood Confidential so much that he began to help out backstage. He was struck with the androgynous quality of Busch's performance:

What was interesting was that it was drag and it wasn't drag, because what he did was that he wore this gold lame outfit . . . a white blouse with gold lame pants, the kind that would work on Michael Jackson and Ann Miller. What was most striking was that it was androgynous, but not drag. The only real drag was the wigs.¹³

Because Busch was playing men as well as women, his make-up was androgynous, as well. He covered his beard with a simple base and applied slightly heavier eye make-up than one would use for a juvenile. The effect was a blurring of gender demarcation.

Critical response to Hollywood Confidential was mixed. Variety found the evening lacked "the extra push to raise it from mildly nutty to outrageous."¹⁴ John S. Patterson, in the Villager, found the use of props and costume elements "detracted, split focus, and gave an amateurish air to a thoroughly adept professional."¹⁵ Robert Coe of the Village Voice posed a criticism that would recur continually throughout Busch's solo career ("none of his male characters inspire him . . . Busch only takes off when he's Miss Lame, the Queen of Hollywood Babylon").¹⁶

Everett Quinton of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, remembers Ludlam commenting that Busch's male characters were weak.¹⁷ In fact, Ludlam advised Busch to play only female roles. But the type of narrative Busch was attempting obliged him to use male characters. Critics noted his ability to change character with the skill of a quick sketch artist. Especially with his female characterizations, he began to develop a performance style that was, in essence, a montage of film star

references, achieved through vocal intonation, physical manner, and gesture. As the

Village Voice critic noted:

At various times, Lola has Hepburn's commanding smile and bright eyes, Colbert's S-shaped slouch and preoccupied walk, Swanson's imperiousness, Garbo's exquisite emptiness, Bacall's tossing head, Crawford's smoulder. Some of the moments were so fleeting I thought I was hallucinating: at one point I swear he does three seconds of Ingrid Bergman in one of my favorite scenes from Notorious.¹⁸

Hollywood Confidential was a more successful undertaking for Busch the performer than Busch the playwright. In an effort to assemble as many "classic moments" from movieland epics as possible, Hollywood Confidential was more a compendium of "scenes we'd like to see" than a play; it finally lost focus and spun out of control, as Busch tried to "cram everything in one possibly could."¹⁹

In Myrtle Pope and Hollywood Confidential, the film references are specific, while the interest in the Limbo plays, Psycho Beach Party, The Lady in Question, and Red Scare on Sunset, lies more in more in the scene itself, rather than in recognizing the movie reference. Taussig observed:

Now it is like distilling the ideas down to a central plot line that has references to those films, but the fun isn't necessarily in pointing out there is a specific reference. The performance is not now a specific actress. Occasionally, there is a line reading making specific reference to somebody but the characterization is original. It all has to do with finding your voice.²⁰

The voice was muddled at One Sheridan Square. Coe in the Village Voice concluded:

the machinery of the movieland epic conflicts with the spectacle of *l'homme en travesti*, and the lame male characterizations further undercut the dramatic structure. Hollywood Confidential can't manage to be an epic parody of Hollywood mores, a story-time theatre and a drag revue all at once. So it ends up being bad melodrama.²¹

Getting people to see a play featuring an unknown performer at 11:00 on a summer's night was not an easy task. Rarely were there more than twenty or thirty people in the house; Napolitano remembers houses being as small as ten or twelve. Sometimes there would be no audience at all, and Busch would have to cancel the show.

Busch's actual tenure at the Ridiculous Theatrical Company was brief. While he was appearing in the ten week run of Hollywood Confidential, Ludlam asked him to take over the role of Hecate in Bluebeard. The part consisted of a brief scene with Ludlam as Bluebeard. Busch recalls that Ludlam would do things to upset him on stage, like pulling down part of his costume during a performance. Ludlam once screamed at him off stage for underplaying a scene. Quinton, who remembers the incident, says it was simply a question of Busch's lack of vocal projection. While the specifics of these altercations may no longer be clear, the outcome was. Bluebeard was not a pleasant experience for Busch, and if he had harbored any desire to join the company, those few performances seem to have cured him of it.²²

Busch did return to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, however, when Ludlam asked him to take over Georg Osterman's role in The Elephant Woman. The play had been developed at New York University School of the Arts, where Ludlam taught. Busch remembers the play as a thin scenario with a segment consisting of variety acts. Ludlam asked his friends to make cameo appearances to "goose it up."²³ Busch did full drag in this show (with falsies, something he never did in his own shows). In a doctor's sketch, he played a nurse in a blonde wig, rattling off punch-lines to jokes which he had memorized without knowing the set-ups; he had

only learned the cues. The set-ups delivered by Ludlam made Busch's punchlines outrageously obscene, and Busch remembers breaking up onstage.

Busch's appearance in The Elephant Woman, along with several performances in Bluebeard, mark the extent of his work with Ludlam and his company.²⁴ But while his actual association with the Ridiculous Theatrical Company was negligible, the style that eventually became identified with Theatre-in-Limbo owes a considerable debt to Ludlam and his troupe.²⁵ As Bonnie Marranca notes, the Ridiculous aesthetic includes a dependency on such icons of mass culture as "the stars" and old movies, as well as a nostalgia for the great age of acting (Bernhardt, Duse, Irving).²⁶ Although she does not use the term, Marranca is describing subjects appropriated by the gay sensibility, which certainly contribute to the Ridiculous style. There would be no need for Busch to work with Ludlam to develop this sensibility. But what Ludlam gave Busch was the opportunity to see this aesthetic put to work;

He changed my life. All these things I saw reflected in his performances: the use of drag, the raffishness of it all, the improvised sets, and the painted backdrops. That was just me and I couldn't believe I was seeing it. It was like seeing the dream of what I could be like myself.²⁷

After Hollywood Confidential closed, Busch wanted to create a show that was more suitable to a cabaret space. The result was Vagabond Vignettes, a forty minute program comprised of three short pieces.²⁸ Originally called Chop Suey because it was, as Busch described it, "a little bit of this and a little bit of that," the pieces were designed to be quickly and easily mounted with minimal production values.²⁹ Patrick Brafford was again the director.³⁰ Although Brafford was an excellent acting coach, according to Busch, pacing seems to have been one of his weaker points. The writing in Vagabond Vignettes compounded the problem of structure and

pace because each piece was a loose, rambling, almost improvisatory experiment in style.

That's Show Biz!, the opening piece, had actually been a section cut from Hollywood Confidential. The aging Lola introduces herself and then runs through a series of clips culled from her old movies. In performance, Busch's transitions were so rapid and sharply defined that Napolitano was sure he used a strobe light to create the effect (he didn't). His pace accelerated as the piece progressed, until the air was filled with a cacophony of clichés and well-worn dialogue.

He next wanted to try a piece in the style of Ruth Draper, revealing three diverse individuals through extended monologues. He called it People on a New York Bus. Each character was presented in succession: a young gay actor from the midwest, a middle class housewife, and a psychotic New York City teenager. But unlike the later monologues he would do with Kenneth Elliott, Après Moi, Le Déluge and Reed (both in 1984), these pieces revealed little character and even less situation and action.

The final segment was called La Marquesa, a free-flowing memory piece based on the life of Luisa Casati (Marchesa di Casati-Stampa), a camp figure of the early 1900s.³¹ Busch was fond of La Marquesa for its heightened romanticism, but, unfortunately, it was too diffuse and difficult for most audiences to follow.³² As a stream of consciousness monologue delivered by a half mad Casati, it ricocheted back and forth in time over a thirty year period, leaving audiences bewildered by the narrative's lack of linear progression and abrupt transitions.

If there was any continuity in the program, it was supplied by Steve Goldgram, an improvisational pianist, who provided music throughout the performance. But Goldgram couldn't read music, and after Vagabond Vignettes, Busch abandoned the idea of live musical accompaniment, because without a written score, replacing Goldgram would prove difficult. Thereafter, Busch relied on tapes for incidental music and sound effects.

While performing Vagabond Vignettes at The Ballroom, a restaurant/cabaret in Soho (February 18), Busch was seen by Irv Raible and Bruce Hopkins, who ran a Greenwich Village nightclub called the Duplex.³³ They invited Busch to perform there. On March 14, Busch performed Hollywood Confidential, beginning a successful relationship with Raible and the Duplex. He joined a family of performers, which included Julie Kurnitz, Al Carmines, and Ira Siff. During July and August of 1979, Raible presented a summer cabaret festival with his roster of regulars performing weekly in individual slots. Busch, billed as an "impressionist," played Vagabond Vignettes on Thursdays at 11 pm. The Villager reviewed the show, finding it a less satisfying experience than Hollywood Confidential. Calling the material overly familiar and/or trivial, it concluded that "Busch's characterizations are pleasantly entertaining enough, although they have little staying power."³⁴ Busch called Vagabond Vignettes an experiment in finding suitable material and a style and presentation that would work in a cabaret atmosphere. Although he was not displeased with the pieces, Busch began to work on a new script during the Duplex festival. When Brafford did not express interest in working on the new piece, Busch approached Peter Napolitano to be his director.

Busch's friendship with Napolitano had continued after the run of Hollywood Confidential, and one day Busch gave him a new script to read called A Theatrical Party. Napolitano found the play problematic, but when Busch asked him to direct it, he accepted, although he compared it to "a Carol Burnett sketch."³⁵

In the original draft, the action takes place at a party given by Anton Troy, a famous actor/manager in England. He is looking for a leading lady to play Juliet, Ophelia, and Cleopatra in his forthcoming West End season. Lily Marbanks, a young girl from America has come all the way to London to claim a role because when she was ten, Troy promised he would put her on stage when she grew up. Other guests include Solange Gabriel, a star of the Parisian stage who also wants to be leading lady in Troy's company, although she speaks little or no English, and Dame Beatrice Fortescue, an aging grande dame of the theatre who was once Anton Troy's mistress. The main plot concerns the theft of Dame Beatrice's jewels and the discovery of the thief. Troy's oldest friend, Basil Bayswater, a mystery writer, helps to solve the crime.

When Busch came over to Napolitano's apartment for their first rehearsal, Napolitano remembers telling him:

I'm sorry, but the jewel thing is out. You've got to find another plot hook, something that we care about. I think that was the turning point for him, because I think that was a problem with Hollywood Confidential. As funny as it was, there was nothing to really care about. As much as a stereotype as she was, Beatrice Fortescue existed as a character because you saw a whole life there, a woman who had made a mistake. There was something more at stake. That was my contribution to the piece; I made Charles find the thing that was at stake.³⁶

Napolitano suggested that the premise of several actresses vying for the same part should be expanded. Everyone should want the part, including Dame Beatrice. In the revised version, even Cora the maid is a contender for the roles.³⁷

The pattern of collaboration which Busch and Napolitano developed during A Theatrical Party holds true for Busch's later work with Elliott on the Limbo plays: intensely interactive meetings which resulted in major script additions and revisions. Napolitano called these rehearsals "brainstorming sessions." He and Busch would talk to each other as characters and sometimes improvise scenes. Several important revisions were made in this way. In the original draft there was a young man, an outsider, who had crashed the party. During one of their "brainstorming sessions," Napolitano and Busch came up with the idea of making the young man the illegitimate child of Dame Beatrice and Troy. After Busch and Napolitano threw out the jewel theft device, they focused on the competition of the leading ladies. They hit upon the idea of dividing up the roles among Dame Beatrice, Lily, Solange. Dame Beatrice was now the heart of the play and the role Busch enjoyed playing most. She was the diva, the survivor, the actress of the grand gesture that Busch found so fascinating. Busch offered to give Napolitano credit as co-author, but he refused.³⁸

Busch thought of A Theatrical Party as a nineteenth century valentine. The plot may have been, as he confesses:

. . . real soap opera, but the sentiment was real. Modern audiences want to laugh at nineteenth century theatrical conventions. They're embarrassed by heavy sentiment and want to snicker and laugh and think that you're spoofing. But I wasn't spoofing.³⁹

From A Theatrical Party onward, the solo pieces and the Limbo plays will all have characteristic moments of intense melodramatic sentiment mixed with seemingly

antithetical elements of irony. Busch states that if he could, he would present scenes of high melodrama without adding humorous exaggeration, but his fear is that the audience would not accept the sentiment. This mixing together of intensity and irony, extreme feeling and a sense of its absurdity is a key element of the gay sensibility and a major feature of camp. Often, as in the final moments of The Lady in Question and Times Square Angel, the audience is caught up emotionally in the play's situation, even as they are laughing at the abundant clichés the characters are spouting. Of course, an important element that determines an audience's response to such unabashed sentiment is the conviction and simplicity with which the performer delivers the lines. Possibly, it was in this area that Napolitano was most influential in Busch's development.

Napolitano steered Busch away from addressing a coterie audience versed in movie trivia. In A Theatrical Party, comic lines were motivated by character and situation, rather than arbitrarily inserted to get a laugh. Enjoyment did not depend upon a specialized knowledge of movie lore. Busch's emotional investment in each role was stronger than it had been in the past, and because the story was tightly structured, it was easy for an audience to follow.

Napolitano insisted that there be no costume changes or wigs. Since Busch played both male and female characters, Napolitano wanted him to appear androgynous and have the spectacle of gender transformation occur in the audience's mind rather than on the stage. Busch was costumed in black shirt, black pants, and a white cravat, clothes that could have easily been worn by a man or a woman.

While developing A Theatrical Party, Busch returned to Chicago to perform Hollywood Confidential at the Victory Gardens Studio Theatre (9 November to 2 December 1979) and received the worst notices of his career. The play was called a "collection of insufficiencies," with "no redeeming value."⁴⁰ David Elliott of the Chicago Sun-Times questioned why Busch was "wasting himself in junk like this?"⁴¹ Several explanations can be offered for the widely differing response of the Chicago critics from their New York counterparts. The reviews imply that production values (lights, settings) were quite poor at the Victory Gardens Studio Theatre. Busch suggests that the general critical attitude and possibly audiences themselves were not favorably disposed toward theatre which featured a strong gay sensibility. Certainly, the Sun-Times seemed more than slightly homophobic in its observations; Ludlam's theatre was called the "homo-kitsch Theatre of the Ridiculous" and half the audience was noted to be "offended by the prevailing incense of inversion."⁴² Napolitano states that Busch's performances were erratic at this time; over the years, he would learn to give a far more consistent performance. Napolitano adds that Hollywood Confidential simply had too many characters that didn't show off Busch to his best advantage. Ultimately, though, the disastrous run in Chicago can be viewed as beneficial to Busch's career. He worked even harder to make A Theatrical Party a success and was probably far more receptive to changes (e.g. eliminating wigs, costumes, and props), after being called little more than a drag show by the Chicago critics.

In the tiny space of the Duplex, Napolitano had Busch moving back and forth from stage right (the garden) to stage center and left (the salon). The character

transitions were sharp and quick, as when Lily, the Hepburn ingenue, is introduced for the first time:

Vivian Pernod. (to Lily Marbanks) Dear, you have the wrong genius. The one you want is over there: Anton Troy. [Busch gestures stage left] No, I'm not Anton Troy. Let me introduce myself, my name is . . . [Busch, who has been stage center, talking straight out to the house, spins around, the lights go out, and a small pin spot picks out his slim body. He has changed his posture to a slouch and now speaks in the well known inflections of Katherine Hepburn. The transition has taken place during the spin, in two or three seconds.]

Lily. (to Anton Troy) Lily Marbanks, Mister Troy. You are Anton Troy? That man over there [Busch gestures stage right, where he had placed Vivian] pointed in this direction.⁴³

Napolitano helped Busch to tailor each characterization carefully to his strengths as a performer. For example, Busch was always uneasy playing men his own age, like the Young Man and Rafe, Cora's boyfriend. His self-consciousness made emotional investment difficult. Unfortunately, because of plot requirements, he needed one or two in each piece. With Napolitano as editor, the young men were reduced to a minimum of stage time, and as Busch continued to perform the piece, their dialogue was trimmed even further.

A Theatrical Party opened at the Duplex on 4 February 1980, and played the following three Monday evenings. Audiences responded warmly and Busch returned there during April (2,16,19,23,30), simultaneously playing at the Performing Garage (3-20 April). According to Napolitano, the dual booking was a mistake; the potential audience was depleted. In addition, a following was not allowed to build at either space. Although he received his most favorable notices yet from the press, audiences began to dwindle and new bookings were scarce.⁴⁴

Busch had been living with his aunt since returning to New York, and they both knew it was time for him to get his own place. A month before the premiere of A Theatrical Party he found an apartment in the West Village. Kenneth Elliott had just moved to New York and they decided to room together. But Busch was in terrible economic straits, and now there was the added strain of paying the monthly rent. He also had to buy costumes, xerox flyers, and do mailings for his shows. Occasional secretarial work and hand-outs from Lillian barely kept him solvent. The previous summer he had started to work at the Tuxedo Park Renaissance Fair as a psychic quick-sketch artist, drawing people as they had appeared in a previous life.⁴⁵ However, money was still scarce, and his financial situation began to put a strain on his relationship with Napolitano, who had not been paid for his work on A Theatrical Party. Like Brafford before him, Napolitano began to feel used. But it was ultimately not economics that led to the dissolution of his collaboration with Busch, but a series of unfortunate events that began when they started to work on the first full-length play Busch had written since Myrtle Pope (1978).

The relationship with Theatre for The New City, where the new play was to be done, began when Crystal Field and George Bartenieff saw A Theatrical Party and asked Busch to perform at their annual Halloween Festival (October 1980). In keeping with the spirit of the festival, Napolitano proposed doing a parody of films about demonic possession, such as Rosemary's Baby, The Omen, The Shining. The resulting piece, Welcome to Corona, allowed Charles to play a child possessed by a bewildering number of spirits (among them, a southern lady, a Scotch sea captain, and a Chinese laundryman).⁴⁶ The success of Welcome to Corona led Theater for

The New City to invite Busch to write a full length play for a slot the following May. Busch wrote an extremely atypical piece--a tragedy called Before Our Mother's Eyes. The piece concerned teenage twins who are lovers. Eventually, they try to commit suicide and their mother sends them to an mental institution.

Busch saw Field and Bartenieff's invitation as an opportunity to experiment:

I thought since I had a big stage, maybe I should try to do something I couldn't do in a cabaret. I suppose the sensible thing would have been to do what I do best, what they saw you do and hired you for, but, on the other hand, I thought it would be a good stretch. I had read this little news item in the Times. These twin boys jumped off a bridge before their mother's eyes because they were about to be separated, taken to an insane asylum. It was so dramatic. I conjectured that they were lovers and had been found out.⁴⁷

The idea of twins always fascinated Busch. All his full length plays to date (apart from the solo pieces) dealt with either biological twins (Sister Act, Myrtle Pope) or spiritual twins (Old Coozies, Teethmarks!). In this new play, Busch felt he could use the technique he had been developing in his solo work (changing focus to delineate change of character) with the rest of the cast relating to him as two people.

Unfortunately, the result was merely confusing, except for an imaginative sequence in which the naked Busch played the twins making love to each other; he would roll over on the floor as one twin, then roll over again and become the other.

In an attempt to reach for tragedy, Napolitano did not allow Busch to inject any humor into the play. The result was merely contrived and self-conscious. To make matters worse, Napolitano had taken on the direction of a new musical, The Meehans, which was playing just before the 11 P.M. time slot given to Before Our Mother's Eyes. The strain of directing both productions proved too great for him. He broke down during a rehearsal of The Meehans, began screaming hysterically and

was, consequently, barred from rehearsal. Napolitano continued to work on Before our Mother's Eyes, but Busch became concerned about his behavior. Busch was set to do his one man show for an extended engagement at the Source Theatre in Washington, D.C., when Before our Mother's Eyes ended its run, and he was nervous that Napolitano would antagonize management:

Peter was just outrageous. Acting very erratic, like the great director, the impresario. It was embarrassing for me to introduce him to people. He would put on airs, a crazy arrogance. I tried to convince myself that the product was good but when the product started to suffer because of his ego, that's when I knew nothing was there. The arrogance and fits got worse and worse. As an editor of Before our Mother's Eyes, I think he led me in a ponderous, humorless direction. The play would never have been very good, because I was too young to write it, unprepared. But I don't think he helped things . . . He made the play very pretentious.⁴⁸

Napolitano had a different view of why the show failed:

The problem was it was the wrong play for the wrong theatre for the wrong slot for the wrong time. It was totally wrong! For an 11 o'clock slot at Theater for The New City people were expecting a Ridiculous type of production. Charles thinks it wasn't right because it had no sense of humor, but that's like criticizing Medea because it doesn't have any jokes. Before our Mother's Eyes isn't Medea but it wanted to be. He wanted to write a tragedy.⁴⁹

In fact, they were both right. Before our Mother's Eyes pleased neither audiences nor critics. The play was not good, and failing to be a tragedy, proved to be merely pretentious. Napolitano's direction only compounded the play's flaws.

Busch was now convinced that his partnership with Napolitano was no longer practical. The Source was the first major out-of-town booking Busch had gotten since his calamitous visit to Chicago, and he wanted things to run smoothly. After some deliberation, he asked Kenneth Elliott to take over the direction. Elliott had come to New York in 1980 to further his directing career. Not much had happened in the

interim, and he was supporting himself, like Busch, doing temp work; during the fall of 1980 he began to work as secretary for musical comedy writer Michael Stewart, a job he would hold on and off for the next three years.

Napolitano was deeply hurt when Busch replaced him with Elliott. Ten years later, when interviewed for this study, he was still bitter about this experience:

When I told Charles that I would pay my own expenses for Washington, he said, well, to tell you the truth I haven't been enjoying rehearsals lately, and I think you need a rest. I needed a rest, yeah, but Washington would have been my rest. There would have been no work to do. We played in so many places, Les Mouches, S.N.A.F.U., every hell-hole in New York. I never forgave him for it. When Charles came back from Washington, he called up and we had lunch, and he showed me the reviews. I was gracious. Then I didn't hear from him for six months, and that's basically what happened; we stopped talking to each other. We stopped communicating.⁵⁰

Napolitano and Busch never worked together again, although they have since become reconciled.

During their collaboration, they had talked about a wide variety of projects: a musical about Barrette, a drag trapeze artist, and a dramatization of Breakfast at Tiffany's, among others. Although they had actually completed only three pieces, Napolitano made a substantial contribution to Busch's growth. As a collaborator, he helped give structure to Busch's pieces, as well as strengthened his narrative powers. As a director, he steered Busch toward simplicity which enabled him to work on his audience's imagination, rather than relying on wigs, costumes, and sets. As a result, Busch's acting now had greater depth and inventiveness.

When Before our Mother's Eyes closed at Theater for The New City, Busch, accompanied by Kenneth Elliott, traveled to Washington, D.C. to do his first full-

length solo performance, Charles Busch: Alone with a Cast of Thousands. Elliott oversaw technical rehearsals, but Napolitano's direction remained untouched.⁵¹

The Source Theatre worked out of a ninety-nine seat house, but held a summer festival with several shows running concurrently. Artistic director Bart Whiteman was always looking for alternative performance spaces, and Busch found himself doing his show in a fur vault attached to a bank. Aptly named The Vault, the room was tiny, seating only 40 to 50 people. Elliott put up black drapes, and Busch performed on a small raised stage. The audience sat in big arm chairs on risers. The first act of Busch's one-man shows always consisted of a long piece, and the second act was usually two shorter pieces of fifteen minutes each. Charles Busch Alone with a Cast of Thousands opened with A Theatrical Party and after an intermission continued with That's Show Biz! and Welcome to Corona.⁵²

Not only was the Source was the first time Busch did a full evening in the theatre with an intermission, it was the first time he had a financial success. And apart from David Richards, writing for the Washington Star, the reviews were highly favorable. Richards found that

depending upon your tolerance for camp entertainment, it could be a passingly amusing 20 minutes . . . at this point in his career, though, Busch doesn't have the versatility for the task he's given himself. He seems to parody women better than he parodies men, and the women who engage his comic sensibilities are pretty much monuments of egotism and flamboyance.⁵³

More representative of the critical response was Megan Rosenfeld of the Washington Post, who said that

Busch mixes mimicry, pathos and satire, and somehow comes up with a captivating play. He is more than an impressionist because (with the exception of a Katherine Hepburn imitation by the young American actress) he does not recreate specific, famous people. Rather, he feeds off cliches, using them as

the raw material that he embellishes with the more complicated techniques of acting . . . There is a touch of camp to all this, to be sure, but it is not female impressionism or limited to jokes about old movies.⁵⁴

Busch was originally set to play from July 2 to the 19th, but was extended through August 2.

Even though the Source engagement had been successful, Busch and Elliott were reluctant to work together again because they were roommates. When Busch returned to New York, he began working with Ron Vigneau, a director he had met through a mutual acquaintance, Annie Dinerman.⁵⁵ Busch wrote two new pieces, Escape from Camp Kitchiwamee and Chile Pepper. Escape was pure story telling, in which three misfit boys run away from a summer camp in North Carolina and meet an old mountain woman who recounts a story about an axe murderer who, many years ago, killed her sister, brother-in-law, and nephew. The old woman may or may not be the ax murderer, and the play ends with the three runaway boys accepting her invitation for a bite to eat. After the prologue, which introduced the three boys, the body of Escape consisted of the old woman's story. The play was like a twenty-five minute yarn told by a camp fire late in the night. There was little camp or specific movie reference in the piece.

By contrast, Chile Pepper was the tale of Rumpelstiltskin recast in contemporary terms with a decidedly campy manner. The princess was now Felice, locked in a room with five thousand demo records, and told by her record producer father to find a song that will become a hit and save his failing record company. She is visited by Chile Pepper, a drag queen, who picks a series of Grammy winners for Felice in return for her child, unless she can guess Chile Pepper's real name.

Felice's maid walks in and recognizes Chile Pepper as her brother, Herman Mendoza, and Felice gets to keep her child. Chile Pepper featured Busch singing several songs in disco style and punk rock.

For these pieces, Vigneau worked more as an acting coach, although, like Brafford and Napolitano, he also edited the text. Busch would take on the color of the director he worked with, and Vigneau had a looser approach than Napolitano or Elliott. The style of Escape from Camp Kitchiwamee was more free floating than Busch's previous work.

The successful run at the Source prompted Whiteman to invite Busch back the following March (1982). Vigneau managed to get Escape and Chile Pepper staged, but when Busch presented him with a fifty-five minute piece called After You've Gone to fill out the evening, Vigneau told him that it couldn't be done in time. Clearly, he was losing interest in the project, and Busch turned to Elliott. Although they had never developed a show together before, they discovered that they enjoyed working together. For the next ten years, Busch worked exclusively with Elliott on all his original material.⁵⁶

Elliott's influence on Busch's work was immediately apparent. After You've Gone was inspired by I am Elijah Thrush, a James Purdy novel that Busch had recently read:

I loved the tone of a lot of his stuff. His books had this comic, grotesque feeling, an odyssey-like feeling, an innocent who becomes involved with these strange grotesques, his relationship with them in this strange world.⁵⁷

But Elliott convinced Busch to shape After You've Gone into a film noir parody, rather than the surreal, picaresque adventure Busch had originally conceived. Busch notes:

Kenneth is very big on clarity and doesn't really think in the abstract. He doesn't respond to plays that are abstract or conceptual, they have to be narrative and clear.⁵⁸

After You've Gone now told the story of Christopher McCry's search for his father's murderer. He encounters a series of eccentric types, including a young hustler (Chicken Joey), an elegant and worldly aristocrat (Prince Ernesto), and a burnt-out nightclub singer (Ardella Williams), which gave Busch the opportunity to give one of his strongest characterizations.

Perhaps Elliott's influence shaped After You've Gone into a more conventional mold than Busch might have wished, but without his guidance, the script might have suffered from the same lack of clarity that plagued La Marquesa. Since Busch began working with Elliott, his work reveals a stronger emphasis on narrative structure, possibly at the expense of complexity and experimentation, but the show they fashioned for The Source was the most forceful work Busch had yet done in the solo arena. Like That's Show Biz!, Chile Pepper used camp humor and show business references, but it was far more sophisticated, relying on more than a simple litany of movie dialogue clichés for its humor and interest. And while Escape was a gothic melodrama, like Corona, the former was also an interesting experiment in framing a narrative. After You've Gone showed a complex development from the linear story line of A Theatrical Party.

Unfortunately, even though the material and performance were superior to Busch's debut in Washington, the second engagement for Bart Whiteman did not run as smoothly. Whiteman had taken over a restaurant, Columbia Station, hoping to turn it into a dinner theatre. Busch and Elliott had to contend with a performance space lacking a stage and sufficient lighting instruments. The liquor storage room doubled as a dressing room--with no ventilation. When the show finally opened, Busch had to compete with noisy waiters serving food, unwanted rock music from a band next door, and inept running crews. When reviews were less than enthusiastic, Busch blamed Whiteman's management of the theatre, and their relationship steadily deteriorated. The following June (1983) was his final appearance at the Source.⁵⁹ No other theatres in the Washington area made offers.

Busch's career as a solo performer was hardly flourishing. The New York cabaret circuit was a constant source of frustration:

I couldn't do the mailing list right. I couldn't get an audience. I canceled as many times as I performed because there'd be nobody there. Who is going to see Charles Busch in New York with so many things going on? Why see Charles Busch do his one-man show when they could see Alec MacGowen in his one-man show . . . in my act I was unknown and I stayed unknown. It was so frustrating. The cabaret would book me but they didn't publicize it, and I didn't, because I didn't have any money so it was this vicious circle. You couldn't keep asking the same friends to pay a cover charge.⁶⁰

He tried to get bookings at colleges, without success. Even a series of engagements in San Francisco, although financially lucrative, did little to strengthen his theatrical prospects.⁶¹

Busch was not only disheartened by the continual battle to find bookings. He also began to tire of the format he had been using to tell his stories. These pieces depended on quick character sketches. Now Busch wanted to concentrate on one role

without having to switch to other characters for plot necessities. His final two solo pieces reverted to the style Ruth Draper had pioneered in her one-woman shows: one-character monologues.

The first, Après Moi, Le Déluge, featured a character based on Kenneth Elliott's high school drama teacher from Indiana.⁶² In Busch's play, Irwin Lang is a highly flamboyant English teacher whose little kingdom is the annual school play. He is discovered moonlighting as a bartender in the local gay bar, and as a result, the play's direction is given to another teacher. Après Moi takes place during the play's intermission, as Irwin vents his bitterness and fusses over his adoring students.

The play is a sustained piece of character work, one of Busch's strongest. If there is camp humor, it is because the character relates through a gay sensibility, not because the play's world is defined by camp, screen divas, and Hollywood movie references. In fact, through Irwin's comments and jibes, the play's environment seems rather inhospitable to individuals with a romantic bent and downright dangerous for those whose sexual preference don't coincide with the majority. Busch was funny and touching as Irwin, speaking in a nasal midwestern twang, and his warmth as a performer saved the piece from simply becoming a bitter diatribe.

Après Moi, le Déluge was written in time to be performed for Busch's first full-evening solo performance in New York, An Evening with Charles Busch, at the Shandol Theatre on 12 January 1984. It was presented by Terry Helbing and Terry Miller of the Meridian Theatre, a gay theatre company. Unfortunately, Busch's name could not generate enough business. Ticket sales were disappointing, and the show was not a financial success.

But some good things came out of the Shandol experience. It brought together for the first time Elizabeth Katherine (Kathie) Carr as stage manager, John Glaser (costumes), and Vivien Leone (lighting), who would all later be involved with Theatre-in-Limbo. Elliott had known Glaser, and worked with Leone at the White Barn Theatre. And Glaser brought John Schneeman into the project to build Busch's costumes, which he would continue to do through Red Scare on Sunset (1991). Carr was a new face, but would soon become a major figure in the Limbo company as stage manager and wig designer. And Julie Halston made an emphatic impression on Busch by bringing friends to see him night after night.

Reed was the final solo piece Busch and Elliott worked on. It was a bleak study of an aging male hustler, who answers a personal ad and is brought to the hinterlands of South Dakota. Reed has lied about himself, and the lonely older man who sent for him is clearly disappointed. During the fifteen minute playlet, Reed alternately attacks and woos his pen pal, as he tries to present himself as a person worthy of love. Originally Reed ended on a rueful note of resignation as the hustler reconciles himself to the older man's rejection ("perhaps it's kinder never to see things clearly," he says, as the lights slowly fade).⁶³ This version was revised and the final script, which was performed during Busch's last engagement at Valencia Rose (San Francisco), during the summer of 1984, ends with a tentative connection between the two men:

Reed. Where are you going? Am I scaring you away? (*roughly*) Get outa here. I'll be gone when you get back . . . You want me to go with you? I don't understand. (*angrily*) Would you cool it with the silent act? I'm not good at figuring things out . . . (*confused*) We're not going to Rogers Peak, are we? (*gently*) Oh, come on . . . (*with great vulnerability, but still a little cautious*) Well, I . . . Can I go the way I am? (*the lights slowly fade to black*).⁶⁴

This ending is entirely in keeping with Busch's melodramatic penchant for poetic justice. Because Reed has had the courage to be honest, risked being vulnerable, his reward is acceptance by his pen pal. Still, Elliott disliked Reed:

I hardly did anything with that. I coached him. I didn't help with the writing. I think it works well but I didn't like the character. I found him an unlikable young man. There was something unpleasant underlying it all. For me, Reed was three afternoons of coaching Charles through the thing. It was very simple. He was just sitting in a chair, there was no staging to it. I can't take credit for any of it.⁶⁵

Reed is Busch's most austere work; he was inspired by seeing Billie Whitelaw in a performance of some Beckett pieces. Written in a naturalistic mode, it shows skill in revealing character through dialogue. But Busch was no longer content to work in the arena of the solo performer. He was lonely, and the touring, the autonomy that a one-man show provided, which had initially attracted him to solo work, no longer brought him artistic or emotional satisfaction. And after six years, he had not reached a point where he could support himself through his engagements.

Peter Napolitano believes that Busch was meant to do Myrtle Pope, Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, and The Lady in Question, and that the solo work was a way to get there. Certainly, his work with Theatre-in-Limbo was enormously enriched by his experiences as a solo performer. But as Napolitano says, "it was not for nothing that he was not successful as a solo performer. There was a reason why he wasn't. It wasn't his true metier."⁶⁶ Busch himself sees the solo years as a long apprenticeship, preparing him for the Limbo shows, both as a writer and performer.

Several reasons can be posited for Busch's faltering career as a solo performer. Unlike Eric Bogosian or John Leguizamo, Busch never found a distinct

identity as a performer in his solo work. He presented little plays in which he played all the parts. But as Elliott observes:

They didn't have an identity as a whole. Some were realistic, some were fantasies. It wasn't one thing that he did, that he developed a real persona through. It was a mixed bag of things: try this, try that.⁶⁷

Because he was trying to be so many things, audiences had no sense of what to expect. Producers may have felt a barrier to a mainstream commercial production because some of the material had gay subject matter, or was perceived as such. Busch's slight, androgynous appearance on stage may have also been seen as a liability toward mainstream commercial acceptance. Whatever the reasons, the result was that no agent or producer ever became excited enough about Busch's work to market him and give his career a boost. Although Busch worked hard at self-promotion, he was not organized: he could not do it alone.

1984 had begun with the disappointing run at the Shandol Theatre, after which no new prospects seemed to be forthcoming. Busch continued his temp work as a receptionist at Warners Communication. The outlook was not much better for Elliott, who had begun applying to law schools for the following fall:

I thought that working in the theatre was hopeless. I wasn't getting anywhere, and I didn't want to be picking up Michael Stewart's laundry for much longer. I was twenty-eight in 1983. Being twenty-eight and picking up laundry is not a good combination.⁶⁸

On 9 March 1984, Busch and Elliott traveled to the far reaches of the East Village to see Busch's friend Bina Sharif perform at a club called the Limbo Lounge. The evening was informal; they had decided to go on a lark. Walking with some trepidation towards 339 East 10th Street, they passed burned-out buildings and vacant lots and felt they were entering a new country. In fact, they were. Although they

weren't aware of it at the time, the first visit to the Limbo Lounge signaled the beginning of a new chapter in their lives; they were about to start a theatre company.

NOTES

1. Stephen Holden, review of Ruthless, by Marvin Laird and Joel Paley, New York Times, 13 May 1992.
2. "The Theatre," New Yorker, 22 April 1991, 4.
3. The following video tapes of Busch's solo work were viewed for this study: Welcome to Corona, circa 1982, property of author, New York City; Alone with a Cast of Thousands (includes A Theatrical Party, Après Moi, le Déluge, and Reed), 16 February 1987, property of author, New York. Audio tapes include: Hollywood Confidential, 1978, property of author, New York City; Vagabond Vignettes, 1979, property of author, New York City; After You've Gone and Escape From Camp Kitchiwamee, 1982? property of author, New York City. During the course of Busch's interviews, he gave detailed descriptions and demonstrated how he performed each piece. Manuscripts of each solo piece were studied, as well (see Bibliography).
4. Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 4. Schatz notes that during Hollywood's classic era, the movie studios acted as factories, to mass produce and mass distribute movies. This period, 1930-1960, produced most of the stars and genre films, which Busch uses for performance reference and parody.
5. Hollywood Confidential has never been published. The original unedited version that Brafford and Busch worked from has been lost. The edited script in Busch's personal files that has been used for this study is a typewritten text with handwritten directing notes (in Busch's hand). Pages of re-writes are inserted in the manuscript. Cansino Del Rita (Lola's second husband) is called Vivian Pernod at several points. Busch later used the name Vivian Pernod for the acerbic theatre critic in A Theatrical Party.
6. Charles Busch, interview by author, 6 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
7. Busch notes a differentiation between his solo technique and that of Ruth Draper (1884-1956), the monologist often cited as inspiration for solo performers such as Cornelia Otis Skinner and Lily Tomlin. Draper, who influenced Busch as well, portrayed one character for an extended period of time. Unlike Draper's, Busch's pieces were usually written and performed as dialogue between two or more people, in which he would transform rapidly into various characters. Busch cites performance artist Jeff Weiss as a model for his solo technique, although he does feel his work in People on a Bus, Reed, and Après Moi, le Déluge come closest to Draper's style. For a survey of the one-person show see John S. Gentile, Cast of One (Chicago:

University of Illinois Press, 1989); Jordan R. Young's Acting Solo: the Art of One-Man Shows (Beverly Hills, California: Moonstone Press, 1989).

8. Ludlam had just taken a ten year lease on One Sheridan Square. The opening production was Utopia Limited, a flop that forced the company to resort to a repertory of past productions. As of 1992, the theatre is still the home of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company and has been renamed the Charles Ludlam Theatre.

9. Busch, interview, 6 August 1991.

10. The Ridiculous Theatrical Company gave Busch one line in its weekly advertisement in the Village Voice during this summer. Busch did all other publicity.

11. Busch later said that he and Brafford assumed that furniture and props were necessary because they knew no better. Busch felt Hollywood Confidential had a rather cluttered playing area. By the end of the evening there were boas and wigs all over the stage.

12. Busch, interview by author, 7 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

13. Peter Napolitano, interview by author, 13 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.

14. Review of Hollywood Confidential, Variety, 26 July 1978.

15. John S. Patterson, Review of Hollywood Confidential, Villager, 15 August 1978.

16. Robert Coe, Review of Hollywood Confidential, Village Voice, 18 September 1978.

17. Everett Quinton, interview by author, 1 April 1992, tape recording, New York City.

18. Coe, Village Voice, 18 September 1978.

19. Busch, interview, 7 August 1991.

20. Charles Busch and Edward Taussig, interview by author, 5 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.

21. Coe, Village Voice, 18 September 1978.

22. At that time (summer of 1978), records at the Ridiculous were not meticulous, and it is impossible to be absolutely accurate about the number of performances Busch gave in Bluebeard. He remembers doing no more than four or six performances, and Napolitano and Quinton concur.

23. Busch, interview, 6 August 1991.

24. Although Busch appeared in full drag for several performances of The Elephant Woman, he was a replacement in someone else's play. Myrtle Pope (1977) was truly his last drag role, created by himself, until Vampire Lesbians of Sodom (1984). Busch feels, along with Peter Napolitano, that Ludlam probably felt a bit competitive toward him, especially when he realized that Busch would not be a Ludlam acolyte. But Busch is quick to point out that Ludlam was very generous to him (giving him the space to do Hollywood Confidential). Ludlam saw Vampire Lesbians of Sodom when it moved Off-Broadway, and was very supportive. He died before Psycho Beach Party opened at the Players Theatre.
25. Arnold Aronson, "review of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom," in Drama Review 29 (Spring 1985): 40. Aronson observes that a clear precedent for the performance of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom at the Limbo Lounge is the early work of John Vaccaro, Ronald Tavel, Charles Ludlam, and Hot Peaches.
26. Bonnie Maranca, "Introduction," to Theatre of the Ridiculous (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1979), 9.
27. Busch, interview, 6 August 1991.
28. Busch would continue to perform isolated bookings of Hollywood Confidential for another year in various theatres: George Washington University in Washington, D.C. and the Victory Gardens Studio Theatre in Chicago, among others.
29. Busch, interview, 7 August 1991.
30. Taussig notes that working on Busch's material "was an effort for Brafford . . . this fringy stuff didn't appeal to him. He went on to do some stuff [of a more traditional nature] at the Cubiculo" (Taussig, 28 September 1991).
31. Philip Core, Camp: The Lie That Tells the Truth, (New York: Delilah Books, 1984), 50. Core describes Casati as woman who squandered two fortunes, living in Milan, Venice, and finally in London during World War II. Her dress created a visual camp appeal (black lace over cowboy boots) as did her life style (tame black leopards and negro pages inhabited her palazzo in Venice). She was the mistress of playwright Gabrielle d'Annunzio, and intrigued artists and aesthetes of her time.
32. Charles Busch, Vagabond Vignettes, n.d., audio cassette, property of author, New York City. The author's analysis of La Marquesa is based on this performance.
33. After the Duplex, Raible and Hopkins went on to open Brandy's on the Upper East Side, and Don't Tell Mama, in the Theatre District, building a veritable cabaret empire. Hopkins has since passed away, and Raible now runs Eighty-Eights, where Julie Halston opened her one-woman show, A Lifetime of Comedy (staged by Ken Elliott), before moving it Off-Broadway in February of 1992.
34. Review of Vagabond Vignettes, by Charles Busch (Duplex, New York), Villager, 19 July 1979.

35. Peter Napolitano, interview by author, 13 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.
36. Ibid.
37. Charles Busch, A Theatrical Party, [1980], manuscript, p. 16, property of author, New York City. This is the version used at the Duplex (1980). Busch made small revisions to the text over the years (such as cutting down the roles of the young men). But structurally and stylistically, the play remains the work Napolitano and Busch created in 1980. Busch last performed it on February 16, 1987, as part of a benefit for the Gay Men's Health Crisis and the AIDS Resource Center (Provincetown Playhouse). A video tape was made of this performance. Other than a tape of Welcome to Corona (1980), this tape of Charles Busch: Alone with a Cast of Thousands remains the only video documentation of Busch's solo work.
38. Busch would continue to use this improvisational technique with his directors after his split with Napolitano, most conspicuously with Kenneth Elliott in Après Moi, Le Déluge (1983), with whom he did share writing credit.
39. Busch, interview, 7 August 1991.
40. Bury St. Edmund, "Cliches in Drag," The Reader, 16 November 1979; Mark Lace, "One's Diamond, the Other's Rhinestone," Gaylife, 16 November 1979.
41. David Elliott, "Hollywood Confidential not Campy--Just a Drag," Chicago Sun-Times, 13 November 1979.
42. Ibid.
43. Busch, A Theatrical Party, 4.
44. Busch still couldn't get the major papers, such as the New York Times, to review him. But the small papers were very positive. Jim O'Quinn said that "his hour-long get-together for one is an arch and clever diversion, a mini-drama crafted expressly to showcase Busch's rather singular talent of androgynous character transformations" (Villager, 10 April 1980). Don Shewey noted that "his multiple role playing isn't satire so much as showmanship . . . he does this without the 'Watch me:' narcissism of many solo performers, peopling his world with characters more interesting than himself, and inviting us in to play" (Soho Weekly News, 16-22 April 1980).
45. Busch managed to make several hundred dollars a week at the Festival and returned there every summer through 1983. It was at Renaissance Festival that Busch met Arnie Kolodner, a future Theatre-in-Limbo member, and Bina Sharif, for whom he originally wrote Vampire Lesbians of Sodom.

46. Welcome to Corona was taped during a live performance at S.N.A.F.U., a club Busch sometimes played. Neither Busch nor Napolitano remembers the date, although Napolitano believes it was sometime during 1982. Although Busch would "retire" pieces as he wrote new ones, he was still doing Welcome to Corona as late as March 10, 1982 when he performed it in Washington, D.C. at George Washington University. This tape is the earliest video recording of Busch's work, and it is an impressive document. All the elements under discussion are to be seen there: the transitions by spinning around, change of posture, and focus; the larger-than-life performance style (affecting several, but not all of the roles); and the insecurity playing young men. He only trips over a line once during the performance; significantly, it is while playing one of these roles. Although he handled the male roles rather well, he is clearly having more fun with the female characters.

47. Busch, interview, 7 August 1991.

48. Ibid.

49. Napolitano, interview, 13 July 1991.

50. Ibid.

51. Three years after the first Source theatre engagement, Elliott would restage A Theatrical Party for the Indiana Repertory Theatre (August 7-14, 1984). Elliott thought that Napolitano's direction was strong. However, the Indiana Repertory Theatre Cabaret (where Busch was performing), was a new space, and the text had been slightly edited since the original run at the Duplex. Elliott made little change in interpretation.

52. That's Show Biz! was always used as a curtain raiser when it was included. The second act was called Out-Takes from B Movies.

53. David Richards, review of Charles Busch: Alone with a Cast of Thousands, by Charles Busch, Washington Star, 11 July 1981.

54. Megan Rosenfeld, review of Charles Busch: Alone with a Cast of Thousands, Washington Post, 3 July 1981.

55. Dinerman was a songwriter. Busch began collaborating with her on a musical about Barquette, a trapeze artist who performed in drag. The musical was never got passed the development stage.

56. Since 1982, Busch and Elliott have not worked exclusively with each other. Busch was commissioned to write the new libretti for several musical comedy revivals, Ankles Away (1987) and House of Flowers (1991). Ken Elliott was not involved in these productions. Nor did Busch act in several productions Elliott directed for the New York Shakespeare Festival and the W.P.A. Theatre. However, Elliott has directed all of Busch's solo work since After You've Gone, as well as the Limbo plays.

57. Charles Busch, interview by author, 20 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

58. Ibid.

59. Busch's salary was not forthcoming at Columbia Station, and finally he left town for Ocean City, New Jersey. Frantic calls followed, and Whiteman convinced Busch to come back and finish the run. The following year, June of 1983, he returned for his final appearance under the aegis of Whiteman. This time he played the Warehouse Theatre, the Source's legitimate house, but had no new material. The bill was composed of A Theatrical Party, with a short new afterpiece called A Dream. It was to be his last appearance with the Source. Whiteman offered Busch another engagement the following year, but he declined.

60. Busch, interview, 7 August 1991.

61. After his frustrating experience at Columbia Station, Busch tried to get his career going in San Francisco. Debra Crane, whom he had met at the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, arranged a one night performance at Theatre Rhinoceros, and on 22 September 1982 Busch played a backer's audition, performing After You've Gone and Escape from Camp Kitchiwamee. Donald Montwill, manager of the Valencia Rose, a night club/cabaret/arts center, saw the show and offered Busch a profitable contract. He played the Valencia Rose three times: January and November 1983, and August 1984. He also played a disastrous engagement in Los Angeles, opening 24 September 1983 at the Cast Theatre. There was almost no press coverage, small audiences, and Busch quit by the third week of the run. Eleven o'clock shows were not popular in Los Angeles, nor was camp humor. Busch retreated to San Francisco for his second engagement at Valencia Rose (3 November through 10 December). It was during this run that Busch met Julie Halston, who did a comedy act on one of Busch's dark nights. Halston would later become a prominent member of the Theatre-in-Limbo acting company.

62. Charles Busch and Kenneth Elliott, "Après Moi, le Déluge," in Tough Acts to Follow, ed. Noreen C. Barnes and Nicholas Deutsch (San Francisco: Alamo Square Press, 1992). This piece is the only one of Busch's solo works that has been published as of 1993. Kenneth Elliott got credit as co-author. Because he knew the prototype for the character so well, he could effortlessly come up with extended improvisatory dialogue that Busch kept incorporating into the script.

63. This line is taken from a manuscript sent to Ed Taussig, postmarked 3 April 1984. Taussig was living in Dallas, Texas at this time, and Busch had been in contact with him about Reed. He mentions working on it in a letter to Taussig postmarked 3 March 1984. This would mean that while Busch was getting ready to perform Vampire Lesbians of Sodom at the Limbo Lounge (6 April 1984) he was still working on Reed and still hadn't given up on a solo career. Of course, he had no idea at this time that Vampire Lesbians would turn into the phenomenon it eventually became.

64. Charles Busch, "Reed, 1984," TMs [photocopy], p. 6, property of author, New York City.
65. Elliott, interview, 6 August 1991.
66. Napolitano, interview, 13 July 1991.
67. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 30 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
68. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 9 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

CHAPTER THREE

THE LIMBO LOUNGE

The story of Theatre-in-Limbo's first year (1984) is a classic example of being in the right place at the right time. That the company developed a cult audience so quickly is all the more remarkable considering how few performances were given: nine presentations spread out over three months in the spring, and forty-eight more over twelve consecutive week-ends the following fall. Kenneth Elliott observes:

It was all a bunch of events coming crashing together. Like the East Village and the coverage the East Village got. It was hot, the Limbo Lounge was hot, our shows went over, they were fun, we were having a good time doing them. It all sort of complimented each other.¹

When Busch and Elliott saw Bina Sharif perform at the Limbo Lounge in March, the East Village was still several months away from being discovered by the media. But the area was already a dynamic artistic center, where galleries, boutiques, and clubs were springing up between 14th Street and Houston, east of the Bowery. A unique trend in the East Village style combined art gallery and performance in a nightclub setting. Performance spaces like Club 57 and its descendants, the Pyramid Cocktail Lounge, the WOW Cafe, the Limbo Lounge, Darinka, and 8BC, were featuring the art of Kenny Scharf, Keith Haring, Judy Glantzman, and Huck Snyder, and performers such as Karen Finley, Ann Magnuson, Eric Bogosian, and Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw of Split Britches. By 1984, Uzi Parnes, in "Pop Performance in East Village Clubs" (TDR 29), cites more than one thousand performers in over two

thousand performances at the three-year old Pyramid Club alone.² Although the quality of work varied greatly, it was usually distinguished by references to popular culture, especially television and other forms of mass media. Drag was a particularly ubiquitous form of expression; artists such Ethyl Eichelberger, John Kelly, and Stephen Tashjian performed regularly at the clubs during this time.³

The Limbo Lounge was actually the storefront apartment of Michael Gormley. Calling himself Michael Limbo, Gormley opened the club in 1982. During the summer of 1984, noisy crowds and neighbors' complaints prompted the Lounge to move from its cramped quarters at 339 East 10th Street to an empty garage at 647 East 9th Street, between Avenues B and C. With partners Jeannette Ianucci and Victor Mendolia (also known as Jeannette and Victor Anonymous), Gormley presented art shows and performances in an informal party atmosphere.

When Busch and Elliott arrived at the club on 9 March, the Limbo Lounge was still at its old location. They entered a narrow room, approximately ten feet wide, painted black. Brightly colored paintings hung on the walls. To the right were a couple of booths--the only seating in the room. There was no stage. Instead, a performance area was located in the far right corner of the room. Lighting was provided by several clip lights fastened to a piece of plywood on the floor. Spectators not lucky enough to secure one of the booths stood or sat on the floor.

Bina Sharif, whom Busch had met at the Renaissance Fair several years before, performed her act: a recitation of the names of designer perfumes. The audience, as Busch and Elliott remember it, was comprised of East Village types in their twenties, dressed in black, hair dyed an assortment of colors, and sporting an

androgynous appearance. Busch was immediately intrigued with the raffish atmosphere and remarked to Elliott that it would be fun to do a play there. They approached Michael Gormley, who was accommodating and gave them a slot on Friday and Saturday evening four weeks later (April 6th and 7th).

The popular tale of how Vampire Lesbians was written, recounted in various interviews with Busch over the years, implies that he completed it in a matter of hours after the booking at the Limbo Lounge was finalized. Although it makes a good story, this was not the case. Busch had actually written a first draft of Vampire Lesbians during the previous summer and held a reading at his apartment sometime in September.⁴

This original draft contained two scenes and an epilogue. Retaining the idea of two battling vampire divas from Teethmarks!, Vampire Lesbians of Sodom began with a scene in biblical Sodom where two centurions bring in an innocent young girl to be sacrificed to the dreaded Succubus, a vampire who demands the blood of young virgins. The virgin pleads with the guards to spare her but to no avail. The Succubus enters, banters with the girl, and begins to drink her blood as the lights black out. The next scene jumps to the year 1900. The action takes place in a rustic inn in Brittany. The young virgin, now a vampire herself called Madeleine Astarte, is a rival diva to the Succubus (now called La Condesa Scrofula de La Hoya). A vampire hunter, Salazar, enters and tries to destroy the vampires. Astarte and La Condesa raise the cry of the Banshee through a black magic chant and manage to escape. In the epilogue, which takes place in Las Vegas in 1982, Astarte is now former movie star Madeleine Andrews. She is rehearsing a musical number for a big

Las Vegas nightclub show with three chorus boys. The rehearsal is interrupted by a charwoman, actually La Condesa, who has fallen on hard times. Andrews dismisses the chorus boys, confronts La Condesa, and the two are finally reconciled as the curtain falls.

Busch originally had Bina Sharif in mind for the Succubus, and wrote the part of the Virgin/Astarte/Andrews for himself. The play was set aside after the September reading until the fortuitous visit to the Limbo Lounge. Once the booking was assured, Busch revised Vampires. The Brittany scene was cut, replaced with a scene set in Hollywood, 1920. The two vampires were now rival stage stars out to conquer Hollywood. Salazar first appeared in drag as gossip columnist Oatsie Carewe.⁵ But the banshee device was retained and the Vampires still escaped as the scene ended. Because there was little time to rehearse, the Las Vegas epilogue was not presented.

Busch's role was conceived and always performed as three separate routines, rather than as a consistent character. The play was never intended to be more than a series of sketches to showcase him as a performer. He even played the three scenes, Sodom, 1920s Hollywood, and Las Vegas, 1982, in three different acting styles:

The first scene was sort of this Minsky's burlesque thing. Scene two was a drawing room comedy circa 1920, and I was sort of Lenore Ulric [a Belasco star known for her impassioned roles] or Jane Cowl [stage star who sometimes wrote her own vehicles], with the poses that I would get into, the curved back, the hand, and there were Bernhardt elements in the intensity. Scene three is more like a contemporary sitcom, with these two battling dames, like Golden Girls.⁶

The role's disparate elements were linked together by Busch's personality and warmth as a performer, but there was no character through-line in the writing.

With a few phone calls, the casting for Vampire Lesbians was completed.

Bina Sharif was unavailable due to scheduling conflicts, so Busch asked Lola Pashalinski, whom he knew from his sojourn at the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, to play the Succubus. The rest of the cast was comprised of friends of Busch and Elliott. Theresa Aceves had met Busch at the Source Theatre in Washington, D.C. Aceves, a petite, dark-haired beauty, with a waif-like quality and a high, breathy voice, was able to project fragility one moment and bellow like a washerwoman the next. She was cast as Renee Vain, the ingenue in scene two, whom La Condesa has under her spell.

Andy Halliday, Busch's oldest friend, was small and wiry, with a high-strung manner and a distinctive voice due to a chronic sinus condition. He was cast as La Condesa's butler, Etienne, whose former identity had been Baby Kelly Ambrose, a hatchet wielding child star in vaudeville.

Arnie Kolodner, several years younger than the others, was only twenty-two at the time. He had just graduated from the New York University School of the Arts with a BFA in Acting. Although Kolodner possessed the good looks of a young juvenile, he gave off an air of arrogance, a cocky manner that gave him a smarmy quality. Kolodner was set to play the more sophisticated centurion, and Bobby Carey, a friend of Kenneth Elliott would be the naive, good-hearted centurion. Carey had never really acted before, but possessed a handsome face and a well-proportioned physique; the centurions would be scantily clad. Carey's physical appearance combined with his thick New Jersey accent, gravelly voice, and awkward line readings to fit the slap-dash look of the performance. Elliott called his old classmate

from Northwestern, Tom Aulino, to play Oatsie Carewe. Aulino was a versatile young character actor with a flair for comedy. Elliott himself rounded out the cast as King Carlisle, Renee Vain's paramour in the new Hollywood scene. Although Elliott was not a trained actor, his strong directorial sense enabled him to give a technically proficient performance and he projected a slightly affected air that was just right for the role of the matinee idol King Carlisle.

For the two performances on April 6th and 7th, Busch and Elliott spent a budget of about \$36, mostly on postage for flyers.⁷ Duplicating costs were absorbed by Busch's unknowing employers at Warner Communications, where scripts and flyers were copied on the sly. Kathie Carr, who had been stage manager for Busch's show at the Shandol, took on similar duties with Vampire Lesbians. She also helped Busch coordinate the costumes, and discovered a talent for wig styling, a duty she has continued to perform for all the Limbo shows since Vampire Lesbians.⁸

Costumes were makeshift and quickly thrown together. Bobby Carey cut up his old leather jacket to make loin cloths for the centurions. Busch appropriated some old dresses with a camp flavor his aunt had collected at a Salvation Army outlet, which was also the source of Andy Halliday's tuxedo. Theresa Aceves wore a full slip belted above the waist to give her a flapper look, and Elliott's sweater and slacks gave him the appearance of a classic stage juvenile from the 1920s.

One costume design deserves a more detailed description: the Virgin in scene one. Busch, who often played with the androgynous aspect of drag, designed a tantalizing costume. The long tresses of his wig fell over his shoulders and covered his chest, modestly covering the area where his breasts would have been. A long

piece of pink tulle belted his waist and was tied in a bow over his crotch. The identifying anatomical parts that would have given his sex away were teasingly hidden, while his buttocks were exposed. He completed the Virgin's costume with spiked heels, to suggest a 1940s burlesque star.

Flyers were sent out, and the audience who showed up (about sixty) was quite different from the crowd that had seen Bina Sharif. They were not East Village habitués, but, rather, friends of the cast and people who had signed Busch's mailing list for his one-man show. Vampire Lesbians was warmly received, and Michael Gormley asked them back again.

Lola Pashalinski, however, could not muster up much enthusiasm for the Limbo Lounge and dropped out. But even though Pashalinski did only two performances, her contribution to the initial reception of Vampire Lesbians should not be minimized. According to the rest of the cast, she was very funny and energetic in the role. And, as an Obie award winning actress, Pashalinski was certainly the best known performer in the company. She had a following of her own and got "special guest star" billing on the flyer, while the rest of the company, including Busch, were listed alphabetically.

Pashalinski understood the slightly over-the-top style Busch was aiming for and matched his strength on stage.⁹ Physically, she was an ample woman and the visual contrast between Pashalinski and the frail-looking Busch enhanced the comedy as well as Busch's gender impersonation. There is no doubt that she contributed to the success of the initial run, thereby helping to pave the way for the return engagement.¹⁰

Before returning to the Limbo Lounge, Busch and Elliott got a booking at 8BC, a club that called itself the East Village "Vaudeville House."¹¹ Busch needed to replace Pashalinski and called Julie Halston. As she recounts it:

He said, I kept thinking, who is a weird, ballsy gal who could do this? And I thought of you. I said, I don't know, I'm on Wall Street [as a corporate librarian] and he said, it's a week-end, only one week-end.¹²

With Halston, the original company was now complete, although they still hadn't found a name. But an important bonding was beginning to take place. This group of people liked each other, and they were beginning to think of themselves as an extended family.

The cast members had varying degrees of theatrical experience, from Bobby Carey (none) to Theresa Aceves, Tom Aulino, and Arnie Kolodner, who had trained and worked in professional theatre but hardly had thriving acting careers at this time (although Kolodner was quite successful as a magician, performing at children's parties). Ironically, the group's unseasoned appearance was a major factor in their initial success. Elliott became aware that the company's appeal lay in their exuberantly amateurish performances:

That was part of our Limbo signature . . . the thing about all these people, like Bobby [Carey], the line readings were very amateurish, especially early on, but people loved that. I didn't try to change that, I didn't try to do anything about that, because it wasn't a realistic play.¹³

Vampire Lesbians became as much about a company performing a play as about the play itself.

Busch was a different matter. His six-year apprenticeship as a solo performer equipped him with a sharp sense of timing, an ability to play with an audience, and

an ease on stage that made him a skillful comedian rather than simply a drag artist who was trying to create the illusion of femininity.

Ironically, Elliott himself had never cared much for drag performance:

What is interesting about drag is the heightening, the bigger than life aspect. Charles, as a leading lady, can become a bit more reminiscent of the grander, bigger than life ladies of the theatre: Katherine Cornell, Lynne Fontanne, or Sarah Bernhardt. Our little company was like a theatre company with a leading lady who had all the best parts and was the star--the big star. That is the way drag enhanced what we did. I don't find drag inherently amusing or interesting unless used in the right kind of way, which Charles has done.¹⁴

Elliott gave Busch little direction. With the others, he approached Vampire Lesbians as if he were directing a Restoration comedy:

That slightly larger than life style, doing a lot of three-quarter turns out to the audience, that kind of thing. Making it believable but making it big . . . There wasn't much to the parts, there was an essence: the nutty ingenue, the innocent in town, the leering older guard, the grand actress, the gossip columnist--they're types, they're simple. The show is a vaudeville sketch, not really a play.¹⁵

Elliott conducted rehearsals with a discipline and professional attitude that Halston found disconcerting given the material they were working with:

Boulevard theatre and Restoration comedy, those were the two terms Kenneth used in talking about Vampires, and I remember thinking this guy is out of his mind. I thought we were going to be doing a campy drag show with Charles a cut above, because I had seen his work. I was very confused, because Ken was treating this like Hedda Gabler.¹⁶

Elliott's disciplined staging and focus gave Vampire Lesbians a professional polish that was unusual in the downtown club scene. He had originally held eight rehearsals over a two and a half week period (with Pashalinski) and later worked Halston in, rehearsing with her privately.

After one performance at 8BC on May 18th (Halston's first), they were back at the Limbo Lounge (2 June). This performance was videotaped, as were all

subsequent Theatre-in-Limbo productions. Busch and the company studied these tapes carefully. As Tom Aulino notes, "we learned a lot from taping."¹⁷ Elliott is very critical of the June 2nd performance:

When I see it, I think it's dreadful. I think people didn't expect much at these clubs. If there was something vaguely sparkling, they ate it up. I think Charles does have something even then. The other people are good-looking and appealing somehow, and the audience likes them.¹⁸

The videotape reveals a tentative performance; the actors are still trying to find their way towards a style of playing.

At the end of the 2 June performance tape, Busch steps out of character, thanks the audience, and urges them to sign a mailing list so they can be notified of upcoming productions. This curtain speech would become a regular feature of Limbo performances during the following fall and even when the company moved Off-Broadway. Certain phrases became ensconced as part of the curtain speech. They included: "our only advertisement is a geek with a sandwich board on the corner of Avenue A," "my tour de force is forced to tour," and the opening greeting, "bless you, darlings."¹⁹

Working conditions at the Limbo Lounge were poor. The room behind the front room/performance area was used as an illegal bar before the show, so there was no storage space on the premises nor a place to dress. Luckily, Theresa Aceves was subletting a studio on Avenue C and 10th Street, so the cast used her apartment as a dressing room.

When they arrived at the Lounge, Aulino, Kolodner, and Carey would set up a props/costume table in the stairwell of the adjacent apartment building, which had a

connecting door. Kolodner and Halston remember often telling each other that they had real jobs to go back to.

As discomfiting as these circumstances were, the cast was having great fun, and Busch was joyous about working with a supportive group of actors. He decided to write another play to keep the company together. When Busch first appeared at the Limbo Lounge he didn't know what to expect:

It turned out that there was no loyal Limbo Lounge audience. It was just whoever came to see whatever particular show. I realized quickly that I could do whatever I wanted to do here . . . I could be more ambitious. I could actually do narrative and they'd listen because it was the same audience that had been seeing me [do the solo pieces]. It was more sophisticated, not a punk, beer-drinking audience.²⁰

Busch wrote Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium soon after the first performance of Vampire Lesbians at Limbo. When Halston took over the role of the Succubus/La Condesa, Busch added a role for her in Theodora, not because the play needed it (in fact, her role is extraneous), but because he and the rest of the company enjoyed being with her.

Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium was loosely based on the Victorien Sardou play, Théodora, written as a vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt. Like the Sardou original, Theodora tells of the decadent Emperor Justinian and his wife the Empress Theodora, but Busch's version is a decidedly camp treatment. The play opens with Rita (Aceves), lady in waiting to Theodora, and her brother Toso (Halliday) plotting against the Emperor. Rita and Toso are married, as well as siblings; Toso is also the sexual plaything of the Emperor Justinian. Justinian (Elliott) enters with his nagging Aunt Vulva (Halston), who wonders why Theodora has not yet presented him with a son. Theodora (Busch) strides on, upset at Justinian's attentions to Toso. In order to

win back her husband, Theodora disguises herself as a boy and goes to the gypsy camp to see her old friend Fata Morgana, the queen of the gypsies (Aulino). At the gypsy camp are also Andreas (Kolodner) and his friend Marcus (Carey), revolutionaries who are plotting to assassinate Justinian. Fata Morgana gives Theodora a love potion to win back Justinian, but Theodora accidentally bumps into Andreas, swallows the potion, and falls madly in love with him. They spend the night together, and Theodora learns of the assassination plot.

Back at the palace, Marcus is captured. Theodora realizes that if Marcus is tortured he will reveal Andreas's name as a fellow conspirator, so she stabs him with her gold hairpin. Andreas, captured, believes Theodora has betrayed him and stabs himself. In a parody of revenge tragedy, Toso kills Justinian, Aunt Vulva kills Toso and then herself, Theodora kills Rita, Fata Morgana takes poison and dies, and Theodora, hearing the guards coming, stabs herself. As the lights fade, the stage is littered with the bodies of the entire cast.

Busch's wit is generally more apparent in his performances than in his texts. The cliché-ridden dialogue is made funny through Busch's delivery and the idiosyncratic characterizations of the rest of the cast. The early Limbo efforts like Vampire Lesbians and Theodora derive a good deal of humor from the contrast between the stiff pontification of costume drama and the "tell it like it is" manner inherent in much drag humor. Here is an exchange from the revised version of Theodora with the character of Aunt Vulva added for Halston:

Theodora. [with "classical" delivery] Woman, think you not that I would cut off my left breast if only to suckle a babe at my right. You must give me time. Justinian and I have been married only five years.

Vulva. [*similar delivery*] Only five years. My dear, by the time I was married ten years, I had twelve children.

Theodora. [*switching her manner to a tough "broad"*] Yeah, and they all hate you.²¹

Humor is generated by incongruous behavior rather than a clever punchline.

Theodora was the first script Busch wrote expressly for his new company of players, and the characters in this play carry the seeds of what Busch and his fellow actors call their "trips." Busch was beginning to sense that each of his seven cohorts had a unique personality that could be exploited. The Limbo actor was not a chameleon who took on the colors of the character. Instead, a Theatre-in-Limbo performance consisted of celebrity acting: a personality projected through a role so the spectator was continually made aware of the performer as well as the impersonation.²² In essence, a double role was being performed. The Limbo actor presented himself first in the role of an actor in the company, then as the character defined by the given circumstances of the play. Halston, for instance, combined pretension with the spirit of a Long Island hausfrau; a television talk show hostess lost in the world of costume drama. Bobby Carey had a great physique, and an earnestness that made his inept performances charming. For others, their trips were discovered in rehearsals. Theresa Aceves, for example, began a tradition of screaming in every Limbo role:

Theodora was the first time the scream happened. They asked me to scream in rehearsal. They didn't expect me to really scream, so I let out a scream and there was this pile of dead bodies on the stage rocking up and down with laughter because I really screamed.²³

Thereafter, Busch wrote a moment in every show for Aceves to scream; this became part of her trip. Devotees of the company began to recognize each actor's trip and

look forward to it. By the time Times Square Angel closed the fall season, all Aceves needed to do was scream, and Limbo faithfuls would give her a hand.

For the premiere of Theodora on 8 June, two new members joined to help shape the production's appearance. John Glaser, who had coordinated costumes for Busch's show at the Shandol, contributed some costume elements, including the imperial headdresses worn by Theodora and Justinian. Glaser brought a lively sense of the absurd to the Limbo shows he worked on. The royal headdresses had plastic forks sticking out of them, painted gold; the perfect touch of kitsch that also implied this stock company was not of the first order. The costumes were constructed from Kathie Carr's old bed sheets which Glaser then dyed.

Andy Halliday brought in the second new member, Jeff Veazey, who choreographed Halliday in a strip tease number which Toso performs for the Emperor. Veazey became resident choreographer and continued to stage dances for Limbo shows through Psycho Beach Party (1987).

All the plays Busch wrote for the Limbo Lounge were required to be no longer than forty-five minutes, due to the crowded booking schedule. Theodora's running time, thirty-eight minutes, was slightly longer than Vampire Lesbians. The show was mounted in six rehearsals, and if certain moments were awkward, Elliott gave little thought to fixing and polishing; this was still just a lark, and no one was coming to review it. Because summer was approaching and the temperature was climbing, Theodora was moved into the backyard of the Limbo Lounge, called the Gracie Mansion sculpture garden, where bleachers were set up for the audience.²⁴

Theodora played two week-ends, 8-9 and 29-30 June.

The cast gave a performance that was a bit more sure-footed than Vampire Lesbians the week before. But the style, like the writing, was a still confused. Only Elliott gave a sustained performance as the Emperor Justinian. Talking with a thick Midwestern accent in a high-pitched, nasal twang, he was quite droll. Busch's work as Theodora was slightly unfocused. He delivered a line like Tallulah Bankhead, murmured and pouted like Mae West, and threw himself into an emotional outburst, declaiming like Sarah Bernhardt. But these transitions were abrupt and often obvious. There was little attempt to create a consistent character, however bizarre. As he became adept at a performance built on star acting reference points, Busch's technique became subtler; the impersonation became an evocation. At this point in his growth, however, the transitions were somewhat disconcerting. But Busch's likability as a performer made him a crowd pleaser.

One brief sequence, now under consideration, affords a glimpse of Busch's wit and play in exposing complex aspects of gender expectation. In addition, videotapes of two performances reveal the contrast between the responsive cult audience and a less committed group to this brief scene.

Scene two of Theodora opens at the gypsy camp, where Andreas and Marcus are talking with Fata Morgana. Theodora enters, disguised as a boy, in order to remain undetected. Busch is dressed in a loose tunic, sports a wig cut in an obviously feminine page boy style that is perfectly coiffured. He wears rouge, lipstick, eye shadow, and high-heeled shoes. As he stalks toward the group on stage, his hips sway from side to side in an exaggerated stride, his shoulders move in opposition.

With lips provocatively pursed, he stops in front of Fata Morgana, who greets him with "what can I do for you, young man?"²⁵

On one level, the joke is obvious: the actress playing the role is unwilling to forego her glamorous image in order to submit to the exigencies of the play.

However, the actress playing Theodora is, in fact, a man. The line greeting Busch's entrance calls attention to the layering effect of a man playing a woman playing a man. The gender operational for the audience at that moment becomes a complex issue. For Busch, gender expectation becomes a juggling act.

But the layering is even more intricate. Busch is playing a diva who is playing a role: this is his trip. As already noted, this double role playing operates in all the Limbo shows. Busch is continually reminding us that 1) he is a man (he does not wear falsies); 2) he is playing the part of a diva; and 3) the diva will never allow her own identity to be eclipsed by the demands of the play (she is a celebrity and will always remind us of her actual identity even as she assumes another). The triple layering of man playing woman playing man is augmented by adding the conceit of Busch playing star playing role.

Not all audiences respond to this camp strategy of role playing and pretense. At the final two performances of Theodora the audience reaction varied tremendously. For the first show (29 June) the audience tittered slightly at Busch's entrance as a boy, and responded even less to Fata Morgana's greeting of "what can I do for you, young man?" For the second show (30 June), the audience roared when Aulino addressed Busch as "young man." They had understood the layering joke. Wayne Koestenbaum, in The Queen's Throat, speaks of the "joy" gays can feel at

discovering the object of camp.²⁶ The second audience responded with an intensity that might seem inappropriate unless other factors are taken into account, such as the delight taken in the recognition of signs that relate to the gay subculture. For instance, Busch's entrance can be seen as a burlesque of "passing," a strategy gays use to play a role of socially approved gender behaviour (see Chapter One). An audience in which there is a majority of gays or those who are sensitive to a gay sensibility, would necessarily respond with greater enthusiasm to a parody of shared experience--as the second audience did. This group also gave a greater reaction to other camp elements in the performance: imitations of Martha Graham as Medea, Fanny Brice as Baby Snooks, and various film references. This audience understood the camp humor, the textual and performance references to camp icons; they appreciated the concept of Busch and other cast members playing the roles of actors playing roles in a play; and they reveled in the developing trips of the individual cast members.²⁷ A major component of the cult audience at the new Limbo Lounge the following fall would continue to be gay, as Arnold Aronson noted in his report on Vampire Lesbians in the Drama Review (Aronson 1984, 40). As Julie Halston comments:

The gay sensibility, as it applies to Limbo, is certainly the idea that somebody can be over the top. It doesn't offend them [gays], they welcome it, they embrace it. It is a projection of things they want to do. To see somebody, a man or woman, storming around on a stage in a big costume, screaming at the top of their lungs . . . is very appealing to gay people because they can't do that in our society.²⁸

A unique aspect of Busch's appeal, however, was his skill at transcending the exclusive atmosphere of a gay audience. He was hospitable, he welcomed all, and his work did not offend. This feature of Limbo's work, its generosity of spirit helped to

bridge the gap between the circumscribed world of gay fandom and the broader milieu of the general public.

By the time Theodora gave its last performance on June 30th, several important events had transpired. The company now had a name, Theatre-in-Limbo. Busch and Elliott credit Village Voice critic Michael Feingold with the idea. They were going to call the company Theatre-of-Limbo, or Theatre-at-Limbo, but Feingold persuaded them to use "in."²⁹ With the addition of the new company name, Busch was now billed over the title. Most importantly, the Limbo Lounge was moving. Gormley and his partners were in the process of renovating a garage at 647 East 9th Street (between Avenues B and C), where the Lounge would open in the fall. Elliott suggested to Gormley that they should be the theatre-in-residence when the club opened in October. They would give performances every week-end through December and present a new show every three weeks. Gormley, noting the block-long lines of customers waiting to see the shows, agreed to Elliott's proposal.

Theatre-in-Limbo was clearly flourishing, yet videotapes give little evidence of why these early efforts gained such swift popularity. Busch's talent as a performer was obvious, but the rest of the company did not yet really match him. Still, Busch feels that they were more polished than most East Village performances, and Elliott concurs:

If you've seen those downtown performances at 8BC or the Pyramid Club, there were similarities to what Charles did, but Charles' shows had a beginning, middle, and end. The jokes had punch lines, there was a little more drive to it. It was unusual in that way and that's one of the things that made people excited about it. There was form to it and it entertained the audience from beginning to end. It wasn't just outrageous.³⁰

In fact, a considerable part of Theatre-in-Limbo's attraction was due to the combination of familiar material (sketch comedy and parodies of well-made plays) in an unusual setting (an East Village club). Audiences could experience the East Village environment without having their sensibilities offended by what they saw. For, while Theatre-in-Limbo gave the appearance of an experimental troupe on the cutting edge of fashion, it was actually a group of performers firmly rooted in popular entertainment, who, at this point, simply wanted to amuse.

The media also helped the fledgling company. A feature story on the East Village appeared in New York on 28 May 1984, a little over a week after Vampire Lesbians played 8BC.³¹ New York was the guide to what was currently chic in New York. East Village club owners talk about the New York week-end, when the article first appeared and their clubs were suddenly crowded with tourists and curiosity seekers.³² Vampire Lesbians was mentioned in the article as the most recent presentation at 8BC. It was the only play cited, probably because its title was eye-catching and provocative, and although the writer, Craig Unger, gave no description of the production, merely printing the play's name was sufficient to stimulate lines around the block for Limbo, a testament to the power of New York at that time.

That summer People, a highly popular magazine with a national circulation, printed a story on the East Village performance scene and included a photograph of Theodora being performed in the Gracie Mansion sculpture garden.³³ For a fledgling company, Theatre-in-Limbo was getting the kind of publicity few press agents could have procured--and it was free.

Elliott resolved to put off law school and focus all his efforts on the fall season at the new Limbo Lounge:

Everybody had such optimism then about the East Village. These kids who didn't amount to anything were opening art galleries. People from the Upper East Side were taking limos to the East Village. We were in New York, our picture in People, and I thought, this is gathering steam.³⁴

Elliott decided to upgrade production values at the new space, which would actually have a legitimate stage and a sound system.

There were growing expenses for lighting equipment, sets, costumes, and publicity, along with additional postage for their ever-expanding mailing list. Elliott decided to form a non-profit theatre in order to solicit tax deductible contributions. Normally, there was a long waiting period before a company could apply for non-profit status. Fortunately, Elliott already had a non-profit corporation in Zionsville, Indiana, the Cedar Street Theatre, which he had formed in 1974 as a summer stock operation. After two seasons the theatre had disbanded, but Elliott's father kept filing the requisite papers to keep the corporation alive. The Cedar Street Theatre became the umbrella corporation under which Theatre-in-Limbo functioned as a non-profit theatre. Elliott spent the summer organizing the new theatre:

We needed to elect a board of directors. Julie [Halston] was the treasurer, Kathie [Carr] was the secretary, Charles [Busch] was the vice-president, and I was president . . . I think we had a couple of silly meetings. Halston acted like she knew something about finance, which she didn't. Kathy would take notes furiously, and Charles would nod off. Ultimately, what I figured out was that one person had to be producer of the shows, and I was it.³⁵

Because of the already existing Cedar Street Theatre, Elliott could immediately begin a funding campaign. His plan was to raise \$2000 for the first production, a revival of Vampire Lesbians, and with the profit made from the initial show, mount the next

production. A press agent, Sam Rudy of Shirley Herz Associates, was hired, and a gala opening on 4 October was set.

Although Elliott had little experience as a producer, he was a hard worker, extremely organized, and the company responded to his leadership. Busch remarks on Elliott's contribution to the company:

He takes care of us and he shepherded all of us. He was the architect of our lives. He was the one who made Theatre-in-Limbo, he was the difference for me. I was around for nearly a decade, determined and focused, but not quite able to get it all together, and he had that pragmatic, no-nonsense, business-like approach. He was very direct, and off we went. We're a good team cause I've got imagination. My imagination is big, outsized, it's my whole life, so I make Ken free, and he gives me structure--like Hepburn and Tracy.³⁶

The other members of the company echo Busch's sentiments: Andy Halliday, Kathie Carr, Julie Halston, and Arnie Kolodner call Elliott the "daddy" of the company.

The new Limbo Lounge was a far cry from the cramped store front on East 10th Street. The garage space was twenty-five feet by seventy feet, divided into two rooms: a gallery space, approximately twenty feet by twenty feet, behind which was the performance space, with a seating capacity of ninety-nine (often one hundred and fifty patrons were squeezed into the room). The audience would enter the gallery, where eventually Elliott set up a table that served as box office before the show and where audience members could sign the mailing list as they left. A door on the opposite wall led to the theatre space, which could also be reached by a narrow hallway spanning the width of the gallery. Against the wall on house right was a long bar--still illegal. There was a lighting and sound booth, and on the far wall, a collapsible stage. The backstage area, only three feet wide and directly behind the

stage, was used as a dressing room. Again, as there was no bathroom backstage, the ubiquitous bucket was on hand for emergencies.

The stage was twenty feet wide with a depth of seven and a half feet.³⁷ Lack of wing or fly space, or any storage area, prohibited the use of scenery or furniture on the stage, and the narrow depth forced Elliott to create stage pictures in which actors tended to form lines parallel to the proscenium.³⁸

For the gala opening of Theatre-in-Limbo on 4 October 1984, tickets prices were raised from three to five dollars, and remained so for the rest of the fall season. The scenic element was provided by a ten foot square piece of white muslin Elliott had bought for a backdrop; black drapes were used for masking. Busch wrote a new play expressly for the gala. Called Sleeping Beauty, or Coma, it was based on the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale now set in the fashion industry in mod London. The piece was created as a valentine to Julie Halston, who had a great fondness for London in the 1960s as epitomized by Antonioni's film Blow Up (1966). Busch did not appear in Coma, having only just returned to New York several days before the opening.³⁹ Instead, the role he would have essayed was played by Richard Plombon.⁴⁰ In this version, Coma was only given one performance, at the gala.

Following Coma, the company gave Vampire Lesbians, with an expanded version of the Las Vegas sequence added as the final scene. Jeff Veazey choreographed a dance routine, as Madeleine rehearses for her Las Vegas opening. The three chorus boys dance furiously behind Madeleine, who barely moves as she sings "I'm dancing like I've never danced before."⁴¹ The rehearsal is interrupted by La Condesa, now a charwoman. Madeleine dismisses the boys, the two women

recognize each other and squabble until they discover they own identical rings that give the bearer eternal life and the obligation to build a new world one thousand years hence. The two divas realize they are kindred spirits and walk off stage arms around each other as the overture to Gypsy blares on the speaker system.

The first part of the Vegas scene was sharp and funny, and Veazey's dance was a big hit with the audience. But the final sequence between Madeleine and La Condesa was weak. As Vampire Lesbians ran during the fall and the following March, the confrontation between the divas went through a number of changes (the ring device was soon thrown out), until it became a tighter, more emotional exchange. However, the version that played at the gala opening was essentially the play that opened Off-Broadway the following June.

Just before the gala opening, Vivien Leone, who had been hired as lighting designer for the fall season, arranged a meeting between Elliott and Brian Whitehill, a graphic designer. Busch had been designing the flyers, but Elliott wanted a more professional look.⁴² Elliott told Whitehill about the emerging style of the company:

The concept that Brian and I talked about at great length when we started working together, was of a touring company of actors that have come to your town tonight to put on a play. They weren't necessarily of the first rank. It wasn't necessarily Miss [Katherine] Cornell, although we had a Miss Cornell in the company: Charles. He was the leading lady and there were these rag-tag actors. We hang our drop, put up our little scenery, put on our play, and move on. That was sort of the look and the idea, a stock company of actors.⁴³

Whitehill created a flyer in the manner of an old-fashioned "three-sheet" (referring to the size of the poster). He added a footlight motif and then designed the Theatre-in-Limbo logo, a symbol that would give the company an identity and a sense of theatrical tradition.⁴⁴ The logo looks like carved ornaments in a theatre: the center

features an oval medallion inscribed with "Theatre-in-Limbo presents," flanked by the mask of tragedy on the left and the mask of comedy on the right. Surrounding the masks are two naked figures. Whitehill notes:

The fact that the male mask is with the male figure and the female mask is with the female figure suggests any sexual orientation you want. I was thinking what the plays were about.⁴⁵

Whenever a Limbo show moved Off-Broadway, the logo would be placed in a prominent position at the top of the proscenium, as well as in the playbill and flyers.

Whitehill also began to design backdrops for the Limbo shows. He used the ten foot square piece of muslin Elliott had bought for the gala opening to create a backdrop for Theodora, which would play three week-ends after the opening three-week engagement of Vampire Lesbians. Whitehill had not read the script for Theodora, nor had he seen it at the old Limbo Lounge. Often he would only need to hear the play's title and a little background from Elliott in order to create backdrops, graphic motifs, and the flyers for each show. This was all to the good, as the scripts were often not finished when Whitehill needed to begin work.

The unifying approach Whitehill used in all his Limbo Lounge backdrops was to find appropriate source material that physically existed as a graphic object or a piece of printed material, such as a match book or a magazine cover. He would then enlarge it and put it behind the actors:

I didn't want it to be a setting, I didn't want it to look like we were setting the stage . . . For Theodora, I didn't want to paint a castle scene, or a horizon, or trellises . . . I think to see Charles' shows on a completely naturalistic set would dampen them somehow and wouldn't perk you up and alert you that this isn't just what it's saying, that there is a lot of texture here in the nuances of the way that it's said, and the references it's making.⁴⁶

For Theodora the motif was daggers, in addition to Byzantine mosaics. Since most New Yorkers now see mosaics in subway stations, Whitehill made the backdrop a subway map of Byzantium, the schematic lines of the different routes (each in its own color) creating the faces of Theodora and Justinian. The map was also a geographical map of Byzantium showing the Sea of Marmara, the Bosphorus, and the Black sea. The backdrop for Theodora was a great success. Whitehill actually got fan mail from enthusiastic audience members. With Whitehill now designing flyers, graphics, and sets, Theatre-in-Limbo began to take on a consistent look that strengthened its identity: theatre-out-of-a-trunk.

Whitehill worked closely with lighting designer Vivien Leone, mirroring the collaboration of Busch and Elliott. Leone also helped to foreground the theatrical tradition that pervaded a Limbo production by adding strip lights at the edge of the Limbo stage to give the impression of footlights.

Leone and Whitehill contributed not only time and energy to their work with Limbo, but money out of their own pockets to cover costs for material they needed. Leone rented lights and cables from Big Apple Lighting on Canal Street and, in order to save money on delivery, brought them over to the Limbo Lounge in a cab. In the early days, when she couldn't afford a cab, she walked:

There was me going through the East Village wearing cable, lights, templates, gel frames, and top hats. I would leave the shop, and I'd put all the cable around my waist, literally wearing this stuff, and I'd carry it over to the theatre and drop it off.⁴⁷

Leone and Whitehill were as committed to making these plays work as the rest of the company, and the look of a Limbo production is due, in large part, to their imagination and skill.

Unfortunately, their jobs were not made easier by the manner in which Michael Limbo, Victor Mendolia, and Jeannette Ianucci ran the club. As Leone recounts it:

We were sharing this space with East Village musicians and performance artists who do not at all have the same discipline that theatre people have. These guys would come in and just help themselves to whatever they wanted, changing colors, changing focus, ripping plugs off [wires]. With the performance pieces and the performance artists, they would spray the whole room baby blue, including the lighting equipment, and this stuff was rented. I used to go in every week-end just to help Kathie [stage manager] with the damage.⁴⁸

The relationship between the company and the Limbo management grew strained. Difficulties resulted from the disorganized manner in which business was conducted, schedules disregarded, and property abused. The Limbo Lounge would overbook its schedule and then delay curtain for up to an hour and a half. Elliott would run to the corner grocery store, buy six packs of six ounce beers, and hand them out to the restless audience, waiting outside. He christened these crises "the eight o'clock surprise:"

Every night we thought what is going to prevent us from being able to put on our show tonight? Is it going to be a rock band doing their sound check while we're supposed to be in half hour? Or is it going to be a new art installation that is going to completely obscure the stage? Every night we would come in and Vivien would have to re-focus the lights. They weren't mean, it just didn't occur to them that there was a problem.⁴⁹

As production stage manager, Kathie Carr had to deal with keeping order in this undisciplined milieu. Every night costumes had to be put in garment bags, props had to be stored in boxes, everything had to be taken away. Anything left at the Limbo Lounge might not turn up the next day.

Despite problems with management, the company began work on Gidget Goes Psychotic, which Busch had been announcing as an upcoming production since the previous spring. The play was to feature Theresa Aceves as Gidget. Busch remembered his experience with the Imitation of Life Company, and this was his attempt to avoid any feelings among the actors that he was an intractable star. But Elliott felt the script was weak:

You have to give the audience what they are expecting. I said to Charles, if you do a play called Gidget Goes Psychotic, you must play Gidget and you must go psychotic. Those two things have to be, otherwise the audience will be disappointed.⁵⁰

Busch was not as skilled as he would become at tailoring roles to his actors, and Aceves did not project the tomboy image that was essential for her role. The play was in trouble and the cast exhausted. Mounting a new show every three weeks had proved too taxing. After the second rehearsal, they decided to cancel Gidget, and Vampire Lesbians and Theodora were put into repertory.⁵¹ Acting on a suggestion by Michael Limbo, Busch began to write a Christmas show, which would close their fall season.

Press coverage for the fall season was minimal. The few critics who did come, mostly from the gay press and the neighborhood papers, generally found good things to say about the productions. The most positive notice came from Michael Sommers of the New York Native:

Elliott has directed Vampire Lesbians of Sodom so that the pacing, like Busch's writing and performances, always treads that exacting road between camp and complete silliness which leads to total travesty.⁵²

Busch, in fact, credits Sommers with helping the company in their first year by writing often and well of them ("He treated us as something important from the beginning").⁵³ Michael Feingold, however, gave a mixed notice:

Charles Busch's Vampire Lesbians of Sodom suffers in my mind from the inevitable comparison with Irma Vep [Ludlam's play, reviewed in the same article] . . . It has enough humor and cheerfully spunky inanity to pass its brief time well enough as a late show in a liquor-serving establishment, but it hasn't much dramatic drive or substance . . . its main strength is Busch's own vampira-altissima presence . . . If the whole company (and the whole script) had his combination of energy and finesse, there'd be more in the show to sink your fangs into.⁵⁴

But Busch and company did not need rave reviews to fill the Limbo Lounge that fall. The New York and People articles had done their job, and limousines were lining up in front of the burnt-out buildings on East 9th Street. The East Village was the place to be, and the cult following continued to grow. People would return again and again. One group of fans was known as Charlie's Angels. Company members were getting entrance applause and being treated like stars.

On Saturday evening, December 1st, the line of people waiting to get into the Limbo Lounge was snaking down the block towards Avenue C. Vampire Lesbians was giving its final performance. There was not a seat to be had, and the Lounge was dangerously packed beyond its legal capacity. People were standing in any available floor space, perched on top of the ice machine, filling up the area behind the bar, and sitting on the steps going up to the sound booth. Kenneth Elliott remembers that night:

I would go back and forth between the door and the stage normally. But I remember that night the last time I went out front to see how things were going, cause we were going to have to hold the curtain, it took me a full five minutes to walk from the front to the back of the Limbo Lounge, and it was not that big a room, but there were just so many people there. We felt like we

were the Beatles. There was this wild crowd and we held and held the curtain, and then the music for Vampires started up, and the audience roared. They were screaming before we even got on stage . . . we didn't know how they were going to respond once we started acting. Well, they were great, they were terrific.⁵⁵

Elliott says it was after this performance that he began to seriously entertain the idea that Vampire Lesbians could move Off-Broadway.

However, the fall season was not over. The Christmas show, now called Times Square Angel, was about to open its four week run (6-30 December). Times Square Angel took place in 1948 and concerned a tough, self-absorbed nightclub singer, who is shown the error of her ways by a guardian angel. Most of the story was based on A Christmas Carol and Frank Capra's popular film It's a Wonderful Life (1946). But Busch was having trouble finishing the script and asked Andy Halliday, who had a vast knowledge of old movies, for help. Drawing on the film The Big Street (1942), Halliday suggested that he himself play a busboy in love with the nightclub singer. As a result, Busch gave Halliday credit in the published script and a small percentage of future royalties.⁵⁶

After his session with Halliday, the rest of the story fell into place for Busch:

I got all these books by Damon Runyon to get the slang down. I wanted a real Runyonesque flavor. People didn't know what I was talking about. Soon the whole cast was talking that way: "What are you jawboning with him for?" "Cut the chin music."⁵⁷

The dialogue of Times Square Angel is filled with Runyonesque terms and phrases:

Eddie: What are you looking for, Irish?

Irish: I'll level with you. I figure I got me another five years in this dancing dodge. But the shelf life for a dame's good looks is shorter than a can of chile. I'm out to hook me a rich mongoose with maybe a title. Sure, lots of dames like me get titles. Can't you just see me as the Countess de Baloney. Wouldn't that be a pistol?⁵⁸

The script manages to evoke a toughness and innocence at the same time.

Times Square Angel opens with a prologue in Heaven, where God gives Albert the Angel (Kolodner) one more chance to redeem himself. Albert is sent to earth to reform Irish O'Flanagan (Busch), a tough-as-nails nightclub floozie. The scene changes to the stage of the Club Intime on Broadway, 1946. Christmas is approaching, and Irish is introduced by nightclub owner Milton Keisler (Elliott). She enters doing a jitterbug version of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town," with her dancing partner, Georgie (Bobby Carey), who is costumed in red shorts and little else. Back in her dressing room, we meet Irish's black maid, Peona ("I aint no cleaning lady, I'm Miz Irish's french maid"), played by Yvonne Singh.⁵⁹ Soon Halliday enters as Eddie, the love-smitten busboy. He asks Irish to join him singing Christmas carols, but she chooses to go out with gangster Chick LaFountain (Ralph Buckley) and heiress Valerie Waverly (Theresa Aceves). Before Irish leaves, Albert appears and begins his campaign to re-educate her. He takes her twenty-four hours into the future to a room in the Hotel Windemere, where she sees Chick LaFountain and Valerie. Chick has a blackmail scheme to extort money from Valerie's father. The "future" Irish, an accomplice to the extortion plot, enters with the money, as the "present" Irish is heard as a voice-over. When Irish tries to protect Valerie, Chick shoots her. Albert then takes Irish further into the future to observe her own funeral. The scene changes again, and two derelicts, Old Mag (Elliott) and Agnes (Aceves), fight over Irish's clothing. This proves too much for Irish ("I don't believe this is my future, and I don't believe you're an angel") and she leaves.⁶⁰ Albert tells a disappointed God that he has not given up yet.

The scene switches back to the present. Chick tells Irish of his extortion plan, persuading her to help by an offer of Hollywood stardom. The following scene, at the Hotel Windemere, already witnessed by the audience, shows Busch the writer at his imaginative best, as Irish tries to change the future and fails ("I've said all this before").⁶¹ As she is about to be shot, she prays for another chance. Albert enters, strikes a deal with God, and takes her back in time. Irish is now back in her dressing room. When Chick and Valerie enter, she sends Valerie home, gets Chick arrested and goes off with Eddie and Peona to sing carols. While the carolers sing and snow falls, Albert, his place in Heaven now assured, waves goodbye to Irish, who cannot see or hear him. But as Irish leaves on Eddie's arm, she looks up at the sky and smiles gratefully.

Times Square Angel was the first of Busch's film genre parodies. The script was more developed than Vampires or Theodora, and it exuded a warmth and sweetness even as it parodied its source material. This would become a distinguishing property of Limbo's best work, the ability to obtain a genuine emotional response from the very same devices that are being parodied.

The production was the most polished and sophisticated Theatre-in-Limbo had yet offered. Aceves was affected yet vulnerable as the heiress, brazen and guttural as the young derelict, and Busch worked in her trademark scream for her final exit. Bobby Carey, the company's body beautiful, was again in a state of semi-nudity. Arnie Kolodner, as in Theodora, was Busch's leading man, but Busch was able to exploit Kolodner's personality as a charming con artist. He also took advantage of Kolodner's skill as a professional magician, and made his character, Albert the Angel,

into a ex-vaudeville magician. Kolodner did tricks with canes floating in air and doves appearing out of handkerchiefs that added to the mood of wonder and fantasy in the production. Ralph Buckley, a Northwestern alumnus, made his first of many appearances with the Limbo players as gangster Chick LaFountain. Buckley had experience in improvisational comedy as well as legitimate stage work, and played the villain with relish. In future productions with Limbo, the typical Buckley role would be that of the macho straight male who, in some way, gets humiliated: sent to jail in Times Square Angel, revealed as a sexual masochist in Psycho Beach Party, sexually rejected in Pardon My Inquisition, and stabbed to death with a letter opener in Red Scare on Sunset.

As Irish O'Flanagan, Busch gave his most disciplined and sustained performance yet.⁶² He managed to poke fun at the hard-boiled heroines played by Barbara Stanwyck and Susan Hayward in so many Hollywood films of the 1940s, while still allowing the audience to enjoy the play's obvious sentimentality. The role allowed for greater emotional investment than his previous efforts, and for the first time, Busch seemed to be striving for a consistency in his characterization.

Elliott directed the proceedings without sacrificing the play's underlying reality, yet he added such cheap theatrical effects as a tacky and thin sounding thunder sheet when God gets angry. Elliott remembers the production fondly:

What was really wonderful at the Limbo Lounge was, as they walked off together caroling, and the music swelled, you'd see the hand of this little boy we had working backstage, reaching over [the backdrop] and sprinkling snow over everyone, because we didn't have a snow bag. That even made it more wonderful. There was this little waif backstage sprinkling snow.⁶³

Times Square Angel in its first incarnation at the Limbo Lounge remains the favorite production of most of the company.

Brian Whitehill designed a striking backdrop for Times Square Angel. Continuing with his self-imposed mandate of finding a physically existing graphic object that could be enlarged, Whitehill hit on the idea of a magazine cover. The backdrop shows a slightly askew cover of Life. The cover is a black and white painting of a Damon Runyonesque Broadway with neon lights, clubs, and a martini glass. Printed on the cover are the Life logo, and "Times Square, 1946."

Because there was no act curtain at the Limbo Lounge, the audience saw the backdrop as they took their seats. The design needed to be big enough to hold the stage, set the scene, yet not detract from the action. Whitehill's designs continued to achieve that function admirably. And Whitehill and Leone were fulfilling another important purpose. By intentionally creating a self-consciously theatrical environment in which Busch's film genre parody operated, they were firmly grounding Times Square Angel in the world of the stage. The concept of a stock company of traveling players performing a play was never lost amid the continual stream of film references.

In a matter of only three months and with little publicity, Busch's cult audience had grown to sizeable proportions. One of the chief things the Limbo audience was responding to in a Busch performance was the warmth of the performer. Busch's drag had no anger or defiance in it. In comparing himself to Ludlam, Busch states:

He was much colder . . . There was something dangerous about him. I think people see my plays and they want to know me. I think they admired Ludlam

and thought he was brilliant, but I don't think they'd want to meet him . . . I am selling loveability . . . Why must I be what Ludlam was? Why can't I just be funny? They see me in a dress and they can't accept that I'm a funny guy playing a funny lady . . . They have to accept it through the guise of politics or great art to justify it themselves. They can't just accept me as an entertainer and that the dress is my medium.⁶⁴

The crowd at the closing night of Times Square Angel was oblivious to any such critical sniping; they wholeheartedly accepted him as an entertainer.

Busch thought of the band of players as his new family. Years later he would talk of this troupe as the "core group," consisting of Elliott, Carr, Halston, Halliday, Aceves, Kolodner, Carey, and himself.⁶⁵ The fact that he leaves out Aulino and Buckley shows that he did not feel membership in the core group was based on participation in a production; Halston only appeared in Vampires during the fall season, and her role in Theodora was taken over by Randi Klein. Yet Klein was not really considered a member of the company. Busch seemed to judge core membership by a common emotional need. These people had not had a theatrical success in New York till this point. Core group members did not generally have a family life at this time, and if they did have personal relationships, Theatre-in-Limbo seemed to take precedence over them. Now, in the midst of their new found notoriety, they socialized together, found each other fascinating, and gossiped about one another incessantly.

Busch had never been happier. He had always thought of himself as a loner; now he was a member of an extended family. While Elliott began to investigate ways to move Vampire Lesbians Off-Broadway, Busch began to think of new plays to keep his company together. As he contemplated the new year, the future fairly glowed with possibilities.

NOTES

1. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 10 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
2. Uzi Parnes, "Pop Performance in East Village Clubs," The Drama Review 29 (Spring 1985): 5-16. Parnes gives an account of the evolution of East Village performance, beginning with the Mudd Club in 1978. The entire TDR issue is devoted to East Village performance and includes a brief report on Vampire Lesbians of Sodom by Arnold Aronson.
3. For a study of the East Village scene and descriptions of various artists, designers, performers, and entrepreneurs, see Michael Musto, Downtown, New York: Vintage, 1986.
4. The September time period for Vampire Lesbians was arrived at by comparing statements in company members interviews with Busch's solo performance schedule for the fall. Unfortunately, Busch did not keep accurate diaries at this time, and while Ken Elliott did, no mention of the first reading has been found in his papers. Another play, a murder mystery Busch wrote to sell as a star vehicle for the likes of Arlene Dahl, was read at the same time as Vampire Lesbians. Several members of the original Limbo cast were there, including Andy Halliday, Arnie Kolodner, and Ken Elliott. Bina Sharif read the part of the Succubus, which was later played by Lola Pashalinski.
5. Oatsie Carewe, who had first appeared in Hollywood Confidential, was another example of Busch's tendency to recycle names, titles, and even phrases of dialogue. In the earlier play, Oatsie was a gossip columnist, as well.
6. Charles Busch, interview by author, 3 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.
7. David Barbour, "Inside Sodom: The Lowdown on Vampire Lesbians," The New Manhattan Review, 12 November 1986, 3. The budget figure quoted in this article is apocryphal. No one was keeping records at this time. However, Busch and Elliott both agree that the budget was definitely under \$50. As Elliott recently observed, with those first two performances "the legend began immediately, and we've all been revising it ever since" (Elliott, 10 August 1991).
8. Kathie Carr sometimes billed herself as Caracciolo (her given last name) for wig stylist credit. Carr was also stage manager and wanted the production team to seem larger than it was.

9. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 10 August 1991. Elliott remembers "she was Charles's equal."

10. Pashalinski refused to allow a videotape to be made of the show, so there is no document of her performance. The second engagement of Vampires at the Limbo Lounge (with Halston replacing Pashalinski) was videotaped on 2 June 1984. Since then, the company has been very conscientious about taping their productions, and as a result, there is a relatively complete record of their work. These taped performances of Theatre-in-Limbo productions span a seven year period, and viewed in chronological order, the actors' growth is fascinating to watch. In the case of Julie Halston, the development is truly stunning.

11. Parnes, 12.

12. Julie Halston, interview by author, 26 January 1992, tape recording, New York City.

13. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 14 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.

14. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 30 May 1992, tape recording, New York City.

15. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 6 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

16. Halston, interview, 26 December 1992.

17. Tom Aulino, interview by author, 23 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.

18. Elliott, interview, 10 August 1991.

19. "A geek with a sandwich board on Avenue A" was obviously only used at the Limbo Lounge. But when an Off Broadway production was in its last weeks, Busch would often say "My tour de force is forced to tour." "Bless you, darlings," which seems to have begun during the fall season at the new Limbo Lounge, is now the traditional greeting of the curtain speech, which is sometimes called the "third act" by company members. But the curtain speech serves an important function, besides enlarging the mailing list. A relationship is created between Busch and the spectators that helps break down any resistance they might feel still towards him as a drag performer. In an intimate, informal style, Busch chats, jokes, and literally disarms the audience with his charm.

20. Charles Busch, interview by author, 3 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

21. Charles Busch, "Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium, 1984" Limbo version with "Aunt Vulva" added, TMs [photocopy], p. 4, property of author, New York City.

22. For further reading on celebrity acting, see Charles Afron, Star Acting (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977); Richard Dyer, Stars (London: BFI Publishing, 1990); Michael L. Quinn, "Celebrity and the Semiotics of Acting," in New Theatre Quarterly 6 (May 1990): 154-161.
23. Theresa Aceves, interview, 10 August 1991.
24. Gracie Mansion, whose real name is Joanne Mayhew Young, ran an East Village art gallery at this time.
25. Busch, "Theodora," 6.
26. Wayne Koestenbaum, The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993), 117.
27. The videotapes of Theodora offer no visual proof of the audience's makeup, gay male or heterosexual. Therefore, the deduction is based on audience response. However, the author was present at Off-Broadway performances of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, The Lady in Question, Red Scare on Sunset, and the Theatre for The New City production of Times Square Angel (1991, 1992). Responses similar to those of the audience under consideration were observed to come from an audience comprised predominantly of gay males.
28. Julie Halston, interview by author, 27 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.
29. According to Ken Elliott, the naming occurred one night when Feingold was over for dinner at the Elliott/Busch apartment. The first time Theatre-in-Limbo appears on a flyer is for the "Grand Repertory" of Vampires (June 22) alternating with Theodora (June 29,30).
30. Elliott, interview, 6 August 1991.
31. Craig Unger, "The Lower East Side: There Goes the Neighborhood," New York, 28 May 1984, 32-41.
32. Mathew Stadler, "New York Alphabetplatz," New York Native, 10-23 September 1984, 32-33.
33. Michael Small, "Art After Midnight," People, 20 August 1984, 99-108.
34. Elliott, interview, 10 August 1991.
35. Ibid.
36. Charles Busch, interview by author, 9 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.

37. Uzi Parnes gives some room dimensions for the new Limbo (Parnes 1984, 12); descriptions of room are taken from drawings made by Kathie Carr, corroborated by Elliott, Whitehill, and Leone (property of author); and stage dimensions are taken from Leone's light plot for Gidget Goes Psychotic (photocopy, property of author).
38. The first time the company actually sat down on a stage was at the WPA theatre in The Lady in Question (1988).
39. Busch appeared at the Indiana Repertory Theatre Cabaret in his solo show (August 7-18), receiving excellent notices and the highest salary he had ever earned for his one-man show. He then moved on to San Francisco, where he returned to Valencia Rose and Theatre Rhinoceros for a month. This would be the last performances Busch would give of his solo pieces until the AIDS benefit he gave at the Provincetown Playhouse (16 February 1987).
40. This was Plombon's only appearance with Theatre-in-Limbo. Several company members, including Busch, felt that he was manipulative, and he was not asked to appear in subsequent productions.
41. The song used was "Maniac" from the popular movie Flashdance. The music was taken from the soundtrack album, but when the play moved Off-Broadway, because of royalty problems, a new recording had to be introduced.
42. Elliott had originally hired Steve Harmon to design the flyers but was unhappy with the results, which featured a Dracula-like photograph of Busch about to plunge his fangs into Theresa Aceves--which hardly suggested what Vampire Lesbians was about.
43. Elliott, interview, 6 August 1991.
44. Whitehill used triangles to create a footlight motif, overlaying the photo of Busch and Aceves. The triangles, which also looked like fangs, created a bottom area that contained the credits. This flyer format was used for the rest of the season, as well.
45. Whitehill, interview, 26 September 1991.
46. Ibid.
47. Vivien Leone, interview by author, 20 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
48. Ibid.
49. Elliott, interview, 10 August 1991.
50. Ibid.

51. Two years later, Gidget Goes Psychotic would finally open at the Limbo Lounge, totally revised, with Busch in the title role. Under the title, Psycho Beach Party, it opened Off-Broadway at the Players Theatre on 20 July 1987.

52. Michael Sommers, "Sodom and Adorable," New York Native, 5-18 November 1984.

53. Charles Busch, interview by author, 29 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.

54. Michael Feingold, "When We Dead Awaken," Village Voice, 16 October 1984.

55. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 12 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.

56. Charles Busch, Times Square Angel, (New York: Samuel French, 1985). The title page reads: "Times Square Angel: A Hard-Boiled Christmas Fantasy by Charles Busch, from an idea by Charles Busch and Andy Halliday." This is the full length version produced at the Provincetown Playhouse, to run in repertory with Vampires. The Limbo one-act version was never published.

57. Charles Busch, interview by author, 29 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.

58. Charles Busch, "Times Square Angel, 1984," Limbo version, TMs, p. 5, property of author, New York City.

59. Ibid., p. 3A.

60. Ibid., p. 14.

61. Ibid., p. 16.

62. Busch feels his performance is too broad in 1984 production and finds the tape painful to watch. He was still unhappy with his work in the full length version Off-Broadway, the following year. But during December 1991, the Limbo Lounge version of Times Square Angel was revived at Theater for the New City, and Busch finally felt pleased with his characterization.

63. Elliott, interview, 10 August 1991.

64. Charles Busch, interview by author, 31 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.

65. Charles Busch, interview by author, 28 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

CHAPTER FOUR

"DEMOLITION BY LAUGHTER"¹

Busch often says the story of Theatre-in-Limbo has a fairy tale quality about it. Certainly the transfer of Vampire Lesbians from the Limbo Lounge to the Provincetown Playhouse and the first year of its Off-Broadway run approached the charmed quality of fairy tales. Luck was with the company as they encountered several crises and overcame them. Theatre critic D.J.R. Bruckner of the New York Times waved his wand of approval with a rave review, and audiences flocked to the Provincetown Playhouse. Busch simply states that it was a magical time.

The 1985-86 season was a time of great activity for Busch and Elliott. Busch was busy writing, as well as performing. During the Christmas season, Theatre-in-Limbo presented an expanded version of Times Square Angel, played in repertory with Vampire Lesbians. The following May, the company returned to the Limbo Lounge with a new play, Pardon My Inquisition, which ran for four week-ends, while they were still performing Vampire Lesbians. Elliott performed in Vampire Lesbians while training on the job as its producer. He also found time to stage the new Times Square Angel and Pardon My Inquisition.

After Times Square Angel closed the fall season at the Limbo Lounge, the company took a brief hiatus, while Elliott and Busch investigated possible options for moving Vampire Lesbians Off-Broadway.² They decided to re-open the play at the Limbo Lounge for two weekends in March, in order to create interest among potential

investors.³ Several important changes had taken place there since December. The club had been briefly closed for serving liquor without a license. Now the bar was removed, and the Lounge operated as a performance space/art gallery. Michael Gormley brought in Denise Lanctot and Randy Rollison to manage the performances.⁴ At first, Elliott and Busch thought conditions would improve with Lanctot and Rollison; no more "eight o'clock surprises."⁵ But the situation actually deteriorated, for, as Elliott explains, "suddenly there were these people in charge with an artistic quest, a vision of some sort."⁶

Although conditions under Gormley's management had often been chaotic, the company was usually in a position to make its own decisions, a right it felt was deserved, since it was one of the most popular draws at the club. But Rollison and Lanctot had their own agenda: a shift of emphasis towards experimental performance art. The company felt Rollison and Lanctot regarded them with a certain amount of condescension, and mutual resentment generated an atmosphere of jealousy and hostility.

Several internal changes took place within the company. John Glaser was unavailable to design costumes for Vampire Lesbians, and on the strength of his recommendation, Elliott hired Barry Odom to spruce up the clothes in preparation for Off-Broadway. The collaboration was uneasy: Odom was given a meager budget to work with, Busch was unhappy with the designs, and Elliott found communicating with Odom difficult.⁷

Julie Halston was also gone; she was still not ready to give up her well-paid job on Wall Street. Halston felt obligated to find a replacement and urged the

disappointed Busch and Elliott to audition a friend, Meghan Robinson. Robinson was about thirty years old and considered herself an actress of substantial professional standing, having worked at the Williamstown Theatre, appeared as a running character on the television soap opera Search for Tomorrow, and toured Canada in Cyrano de Bergerac. Robinson's persona was grandiloquent and larger than life. After reading for Busch and Elliott, she was immediately cast and fit beautifully into the company's acting style: the projection of personality over characterization. Like Busch, she reveled in a grandiose theatricality and had a commanding presence on the stage. Not since Pashalinski had Busch worked with an actress who was able to hold the stage with him as Robinson could do.

Unfortunately, Robinson caused a good deal of friction with several members of the company. She could be condescending or downright contentious with those she felt did not measure up to her standards in performance and discipline. Even a friend like Halston found her intimidating:

She wore a good deal of make-up, she had a very fierce look to her . . . she was very stylish, she had a big, booming voice, and she was very well read. She was very grand and she would make these pronouncements . . . she could be pretentious.⁸

But Robinson could also show warm concern towards fellow cast members, and for those who gained her respect, like Busch and Elliott, she was a supportive colleague and a reliable worker.

With Robinson now as the Succubus/La Condesa, Vampire Lesbians played to sold out houses. While no major papers reviewed it, the few notices that appeared were more positive than the previous fall. Busch's performance was again praised, as

was Elliott's direction, but critics noted that the rest of the cast now played with more panache.

Originally, Busch thought of extending Vampire Lesbians into a two act play for the Off-Broadway move, but Elliott felt the material was too flimsy to stretch into a full evening of theatre. A curtain raiser had to be found. Busch would have preferred Theodora, because he loved the role and felt it was a good vehicle for him. But because Theodora had the same operatic feeling as much of Vampire Lesbians, it was rejected. Then Busch remembered Ralph Buckley commenting how much he loved Sleeping Beauty or Coma at the gala opening. Since Busch had written Coma for Halston rather than himself, he decided to do a major re-write.⁹ Coma still remained the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale transported to the fashion industry in 1966 London. But now Busch played a revised version of Gillian Mansport, renamed Fauna Alexander.¹⁰

Coma opens with top fashion designer Sebastian Loré (Elliott) raging at his frazzled assistant Miss Thicke (Halliday) because he has lost a model. Fauna (Busch), with the help of her roommate, Ian McKenzie (Aulino), slips some of her designs into a stack of Loré sketches. When Anthea Arlo (Aceves), a society lady, rejects Loré's sketches and gushes over Fauna's designs ("Popcorn balls on an evening gown. I'll wear it at the opening of the Hungarian Film Festival"), Loré fires Fauna.¹¹ He then makes his new typist, Enid Wetwhistle (Robinson), into a fashion model, re-christened Briar Rose. But Enid soon runs away, alarmed by Loré's egomania.

Fauna invites Rose to move in with her and Ian. Fauna becomes a highly successful fashion designer and Ian, using Rose as his model, makes his name as a fashion photographer. At a party given by Anthea Arlo, Fauna meets Barry Posner (Carey), a New York fashion mogul. The vengeful Loré spikes Rose's punch with a lethal dose of LSD, and she lapses into a coma.

Fifteen years later, in a sanitarium, Rose is tended by her loyal friend Fauna. An American nutritionist, Craig Prince (Kolodner), wanders in and wakes Enid with a combination of vitamins and Llama enzymes. Craig marries Enid, rescues Ian from years of drug and alcohol abuse and cures Fauna of anorexia bulimia. They all live happily ever after, while the guilt-ridden Loré and Miss Thicke immigrate to Guatemala and pick papaya for the poor.

Unlike Times Square Angel, Coma was not film genre parody, although it contained various cinematic references to the 1960s: a chase sequence in the manner of Richard Lester/Beatles movies; a photographic session similar to one in Antonioni's Blow-up (1966). There were allusions to other forms of popular culture, current at the time; a dance number, choreographed by Jeff Veazey, which contained an anthology of 60s dance crazes, the Frug, the Swim, the Jerk, and the Twist. Incidental music was taken from the soundtrack album of Palms Spring Week-end (1963), and the opening music, heard before the play began, was Herbie Hancock's Watermelon Man (1963).¹²

Response from an audience without a knowledge of mid 60s popular culture could be tepid. And the play itself was closer to sketch comedy than parodic of any specific film genre. One sequence, however, experimented with gender juggling in an

inventive way, as Theodora had previously done. When Fauna brings Enid home, they begin an intense friendship. In one scene, Busch and Robinson are found seated on the floor:

Enid. (laughs and embraces Fauna) Oh Fauna, I adore you. Fauna, why did you pull away?

Fauna. Did I?

Enid. Yes, what's wrong?

Fauna. I suddenly have this urge to kiss you. I've never felt this way about another woman.

Enid. Then kiss me. *(They tentatively move closer and gently kiss).*

Fauna. Oh dear, does that make me a lesbian?¹³

The following reading of this sequence is based on three videotaped performances at the Limbo Lounge and Off-Broadway.¹⁴

Busch and Robinson play the moments prior to the kiss with a quiet intimacy that strengthens the perception of Busch as a female. As their heads move towards each other, the action is extended, exaggerated for comic effect, but the gender impersonation is not violated; the audience still accepts Busch as "female." The kiss, long and drawn out, is not played for laughs, but an overt display of sexuality. The audience in all three tapes titter, as if they were watching two women performing the act. When Busch breaks away, he turns out to the audience in bewilderment, and speaks as much to them as to Robinson when he says, "Oh, dear, does that make me a lesbian?" This moment consistently resulted in one of the biggest laughs in the show, whether the composition of the audience was gay, straight, or mixed.

An explanation of this response can be found in drag's tendency to blur the distinctions between gender and sexuality. Audiences, their sexual orientation notwithstanding, react to drag's ability to disrupt the binaries of gender (male/female). To this destabilized condition, Busch briefly added, in this instance, another set of binaries (straight/gay). The parody is heightened by Busch's own core gender (male), which would, of course, make lesbianism an impossibility. In addition, this brief interchange between Busch and the audience not only questions the construction of gender; Fauna's confused reaction also introduces an ongoing debate on the relationship between gender construction and sexuality.¹⁵ This moment in Coma is the only time Busch allowed himself a legitimate kiss in a Limbo show; significantly, it was with a woman.¹⁶

Coma was booked into the Limbo Lounge May 4-19, playing week-ends. The cast was on an Equity mini-contract, as they had been for the March revival of Vampire Lesbians.¹⁷ Elliott was now talking to various producers about the anticipated Off-Broadway transfer. The general reaction was that Vampire Lesbians was amusing, but that it belonged at the Limbo Lounge. However, Arthur Cantor, the manager of the Provincetown Playhouse, gave encouragement. Vampire Lesbians was capitalized at \$55,000. Although Cantor didn't want to raise money for the move, he wanted to book the show into his theatre. Busch, Elliott, and other cast members got on the phone and started calling friends, parents, and relatives to solicit funds. Eventually, Elliott brought on Gerald A. Davis as co-producer, who came up with a sizeable amount of the capitalization, and plans went ahead for a June opening at the Provincetown Playhouse. Busch gives Elliott full credit for the transfer:

We would not have moved Off-Broadway if Ken had not been there. If Ken had not been involved, if I had not known Ken, or if Ken had not wanted to do the Limbo Lounge, I probably would have gotten the show together, directed it myself, but that would have probably been the end of it. It was Ken's methodical working out all the legal things, his approach, that kept things moving.¹⁸

But now with the opening a reality, Busch began to panic at the prospect of being judged by the New York critics.

Vampire Lesbians was hardly more than a series of skits, and showed little of the skill Busch had demonstrated in his solo pieces such as Reed, Après Moi, Le Déluge, and A Theatrical Party. He concluded that Vampire Lesbians was "the worst thing I'd ever written," and in an effort to make the play "more literary," he began to revise the final scene.¹⁹ During the fall season, the divas discovered identical rings that precipitate a reconciliation. During the March revival, a new ending had Madeleine try to destroy La Condesa, only to realize that their bond of shared experience was stronger than their enmity. The finale now celebrated a friendship that survives even divadom:

Madeleine. (collapses on the floor) I can't! I can't kill you! Then I shall truly be alone . . . I need you.

La Condesa. (touched) You need me. Someone needs me?

Madeleine. In an odd way, your presence has always been a comfort.

La Condesa. (in reverie) You need me. I am needed.

Madeleine. Isn't that what life's all about? Funny.²⁰

Madeleine and La Condesa begin to practice dance steps and talk about doing an act together, still arguing about billing, but now partners. There is a sweetness in the March ending and, like all the Limbo plays, a celebration of loyalty and friendship.

But Busch wanted to revise again. The proposed ending had La Condesa and Madeleine escape by helicopter to South America, where they would live in a bunker.

Finally, Elliott confronted Busch:

I remember having a dream. I remember telling Charles that I had a dream that we did the play with all these revisions . . . and the audience hated it. They started booing and screaming, this isn't what we paid for! This isn't what we came to see, we want Vampire Lesbians of Sodom! And I said, we have to do it exactly the way we've done it at the Limbo Lounge when we transfer it. We don't want to go changing it around. It works.²¹

Elliott begged Busch not to make any more changes, and he finally acquiesced. For better or worse, Vampire Lesbians remained the version audiences had seen at the Limbo Lounge in March.

Busch was not the only company member who was nervous about the Off-Broadway opening. Just before going into rehearsal, he got a call from Theresa Aceves, who wanted to change her last name to make it less "ethnic." Busch suggested "Marlowe," and Aceves promptly accepted it. Theresa Aceves was now Theresa Marlowe, and will be identified as such for the remainder of this book.²²

The Provincetown Playhouse was the first legitimate theatre the company had played in. Brian Whitehill and Vivien Leone took advantage of the proscenium stage to emphasize the theatrical aspect of the performance even more than they had at the Limbo Lounge. As before, the essence of the Theatre-in-Limbo set was the backdrop. Whitehill had already created a design for the Limbo Lounge production of Coma. This time the blown-up graphic object was a page ripped from a fashion sketch pad, with spiral holes left at the top. The page contained a rough sketch of a dress design and to the right, enormous eyes with pink eye shadow, as if the fashion designer had created compatible make-up to go with the dress. On the paper were

swatches of fabric attached with an enormous safety pin and written on the sketch were the words "fab," "super," and "mod."

With Vampire Lesbians/Coma, Whitehill and Leone began to look for a moment in the evening where they would get their own laugh from the set and lights. In Coma, Whitehill's laugh comes when Enid/Rose lapses into a coma from the LSD overdose. Ian relates the story to a stranger in a pub:

Ian. She never woke up . . . In effect, Fauna and I slipped into the coma with her that night. I haven't shot another photograph. Fauna sold everything and went into seclusion. Dammit, don't you realize the sixties are over!²³

At this point the giant eyes of the fashion sketch close and the lights black out. In the following scene, Craig Prince manages to revive Enid with a combination of vitamins and a kiss. As she weakly lifts her head and directs her gaze at Craig, the eyes on the sketch magically snap open; all is well again.

For Vampire Lesbians, Whitehill created a backdrop consisting of a series of rectangular frames, which appeared to be giant postcards. The postcards rested on an Earth-like sphere, with triangular stars set in the background. Sodom had a moon, Hollywood had the Hollywood sign and two floodlight beams, and Las Vegas was a colorful mass of neon lights and dollar bill signs.

Another design hallmark of a Theatre-in-Limbo production was begun with the Off-Broadway Vampire Lesbians: the decorated proscenium. Whitehill stuck a variety of objects on the Provincetown Playhouse proscenium, giving the impression of gilt plaster filigree. But on closer inspection, the ornamentation was revealed to be toilet bowl cleaners, plastic knives and forks, kitchen utensils, even a wooden crutch, what Whitehill calls the "detritus of society."²⁴ Crowning the proscenium was the

Theatre-in-Limbo logo, which would appear on each proscenium Whitehill designed for an Off-Broadway theatre. The everpresent footlights were covered with small t.v. dinner trays.

When Whitehill had a theatre lobby, as he did at the Provincetown Playhouse, the Players' Theatre, and the Orpheum Theatre, he decorated it, as well:

Anytime you step off the curb and you near the theatre, you should be part of the show. Especially with graphics, that's often all people see . . . It creates an event.²⁵

Life size photographs of the actors were hung on doors at the Provincetown, with signs like "More Glamour! More Excitement! More Wigs!" Posters of Theatre-in-Limbo shows were hung in the lounge and on the stairs. When the audience entered the actual theatre, they were greeted with an act curtain on which were printed the logos of each Limbo show: Theodora, Vampire Lesbians, Times Square Angel, Coma, and the still to be written Pardon My Inquisition. Just before the show was about to begin, a spotlight hit the logo of the play that was about to be performed.

All these design elements, the decorated lobby, the posters, the sculptured proscenium, the act curtain, and the footlights, could be read in several ways. The audience was urged to view this troupe as a throw-back to an earlier theatrical tradition--a nineteenth century stock company. They were also given the impression that the current performance was only one of a sizeable repertoire of plays that this company could offer. But on closer examination, Whitehill's design was giving another message: the entire design was pretense. Theatre-in-Limbo was too young to have established a tradition of its own--it had only been in existence for a little over a year. The proscenium was not sculptured plaster, nor even part of the theatre's

architecture, but rather junk that had been glued on to a false proscenium. The repertoire proudly proclaimed on the act curtain was, in fact, four one-act plays, the longest of which lasted fifty-five minutes, with one not yet written. Whitehill's designs were alerting the audience that the image of this company with its imposing logo over the proscenium was a charade, just as the performance they were about to witness, with Busch in the guise of a woman, was another form of pretense. As

Andrew Ross notes in No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture:

The detritus of fashion . . . contains messages about the historical production of the material conditions of taste . . . Camp involves a re-discovery of history's waste.²⁶

By attaching t.v. dinner trays and plastic forks to the proscenium, Whitehill was adding his own camp statement on popular culture.

Previews began for Vampire Lesbians on June 4th. On opening night, June 19th, the performance was sold out. Critics noted the cult audiences:

This kind of campy show that transforms everything it touches, attracts audiences that could take over and finish the performance if the cast walked out in the middle. Not much escapes the demolition by laughter.²⁷

The audience was raucous; Busch was nervous. Afterwards, the cast assembled down in the green room, getting ready to go the opening night party at Area, a popular new club. A crowd of well-wishers descended and a spontaneous party erupted. All at once, Joey Coté, the assistant stage manager, ran downstairs waving a copy of the New York Times, which had just come out on the newsstands. The review was in it.

Busch remembers the moment:

If that had been a bad review, it would have been the end of the dream. The end of Limbo. I would have to go back to my solo show. What could I have done? Joey threw the paper at me. I was paralyzed, and I couldn't read it so I gave it to Ken [Elliott], but he couldn't read it either. So Ed [Taussig]

grabbed it, and he read it . . . every line was as if I had written it myself. Everybody was mentioned, Andy, Meghan, Ken. I couldn't believe it, the screaming and carrying on in that room. It was like New Year's Eve. It was one of the few times in life where things are perfect and as it should be. No fantasy of mine, of what that moment should be, could be as good as it was. I was so overwhelmed, I went into the dressing room and cried. I knew that it had worked out and that I had a career. It was like a wonderful movie moment. How often is life ever like that?²⁸

Other company members confirm Busch's description with comments that are filled with similar emotion. If Vampire Lesbians had turned out to be a commercial failure, Kenneth Elliott would have gone back to law school, Theatre-in-Limbo would have disbanded, and Busch would have gone back to his ailing solo career. But the power of the Times was such that, while a good notice could not guarantee a successful run, as the fate of Limbo's production of The Lady in Question would prove, it could certainly give a well-needed boost to the box office. In fact, ticket sales were sorely needed. Elliott, who was just a novice producer at this time, had not provided for a box office reserve fund. There was no contingency fund to keep the show open till word of mouth might bring in more audiences. Fortunately, the Times was powerful enough to insure immediate ticket sales.

The company was indeed lucky, for Times critic D.J.R. Bruckner was not the reviewer usually assigned to Off-Broadway productions. In fact, Elliott noted that if Mel Gussow had reviewed Vampire Lesbians, the notice would likely not have been as glowing. Bruckner, however, raved:

"Impersonator" is too feeble a word for Mr. Busch; the female roles he creates are hilarious vamps, but also high comic characters . . . Of its kind [Busch's theatre] is very good. It accomplishes exactly what he wants it to--the audience laughs at the first line and goes right on laughing at every line to the end, and even at some of the silences. That's no mean achievement.²⁹

Other critical response, although not as rhapsodic as Bruckner's, ranged from enthusiastic to a grudging concession that the evening was mindless but enjoyable light weight entertainment.³⁰ Several mentioned the physical contrast between Busch and Robinson, who also garnered much praise:

Since Busch . . . is a slim, graceful man, and Robinson a rather gruff-voiced though attractive woman, the sexual ambiguities are considerable.³¹

Many reviews noted Busch's special relationship to drag which combined ingenuousness with a child-like desire to pretend, an approach that allowed him to be appreciated by straight audiences, as well as the gay cognoscenti. Here is Robert Feldberg of the Record (New Jersey), a straight paper:

Vampire Lesbians . . . has some silly stretches, as well as some members-only humor that might make an outsider feel excluded. The overall tone, however, is such a good-natured combination of outrageousness and let's-dress-up-and-have-a-good-time innocence that it's hard not to laugh.³²

Other critics, like Craig Rowland of the Connection (a gay paper), while pointing out the link between Busch's work and a gay sensibility, noted that his warmth as a performer helped him to avoid an exclusive atmosphere:

There is something genuinely endearing about the off-beat style of Busch's work. It's true escapist fare slanted to those who understand what living on the fringes of society is about, and frequently it's underlined with a gay sensibility. The male and female cast often features men in dresses, but it's not drag in the usual sense. They're simply playing a character in a wacky gender parody that isn't any more bizarre than the dialogue.³³

Busch's ability to make his drag work non-threatening to the general public helped Theatre-in-Limbo to reach beyond its cult audience, as later noted by Howard Karren of New York:

Busch's brand of drag attracts a curious mix of gays, yuppies, and suburbanites. There's a genuine sweetness in the way he portrays women; his jokes aren't hostile or bitchy.³⁴

As the summer proceeded, audiences flocked to the Provincetown Playhouse, lured by the play's provocative title.

Almost all the critics (except for Bruckner) cited Ludlam's influence. The Mystery of Irma Vep had recently opened to critical acclaim and, while Busch was highly praised as a performer, in comparing him to Ludlam as a playwright, the general critical consensus can be summed up by the New York City Tribune:

Busch is treading the ground Charles Ludlam pioneered . . . his pieces aren't informed by the classics as Ludlam's are, nor do they have beneath them any trenchant social comment to make as Ludlam's always do. In short, it's the difference between satire which entertains and entertainment which offers a few satirical notes.³⁵

There is a certain intellectual elitism that underscores this type of response, a condescension towards pop culture, but more importantly, a basic uneasiness about the presence of drag in performance, and a need to justify its use by discerning an underlying seriousness of intent. Busch makes no pretense at having a political agenda, nor is he out to confront or provoke. He has always seen his role as that of an entertainer, and his choices as writer and actor are based, without apology, on what will please his audience. Keith Dawson of Downtown Manhattan found that the lack of any redeeming intellectual or aesthetic agenda was actually innovative:

The peculiar success of this play is in its absolute refusal to take itself seriously as either high art or social comment. Instead, it is pure comedy of the most original kind, relying on the kind of absurd non-sequitur Mel Brooks used to use . . . Rapid transitions of costume and personality enhance the play, giving it an air of urgency bordering on the reckless. It stresses the situation of the moment rather than the development of a more intricate plot.³⁶

One thing that most critics agreed upon was the wit and imagination of John Glaser's costume designs. Unfortunately, his presence on the production team caused the first in a series of administrative headaches for Elliott.

Although Barry Odom had designed Vampire Lesbians for the March remounting at the Limbo Lounge, Elliott and Busch had always planned to use Glaser if the show moved Off-Broadway. When Glaser became available, he was immediately hired. Unfortunately, he kept some costume elements that Odom had designed. Odom, understandably angry that he had been rejected for the transfer, claimed the spirit and style of the current production was his, and brought suit against Elliott and Glaser. Initially, Odom demanded a weekly royalty settlement, as well as equal billing with Glaser. However, Busch claimed that he himself had originated many of the design ideas, and had photographs of earlier Limbo productions to prove his case. As a result, La Condesa's Hollywood costume was re-designed by Glaser and a settlement of \$528 was given to Odom.³⁷ The Odom episode, although disturbing, was quickly mediated, but the next administrative crisis almost closed the show.

Business was excellent during the summer, but after Labor Day, ticket sales dropped off, and David Lawlor, the general manager, called Elliott and Busch into his office. Lawlor felt the cult audience had been exhausted. There was not enough money being generated to keep the show running. In an effort to make ends meet, Busch and Elliott waived their royalties, but what they didn't realize was that Lawlor and his company manager, Thom Shovestull, had either misread or overlooked the Actors' Equity rules on salary increments. They were paying the cast double the correct amount.³⁸

Lawlor made another error, as well. By the end of the summer, Robinson began to miss performances, due to illness, and Halston began going on for her.

According to the Equity rules, Off-Broadway understudies do not receive an additional percentage of their salary when they go on, if they are not normally playing another role in the show. But Lawlor was giving Halston an additional percentage of her salary each time she went on for Robinson, which was sometimes weeks at a stretch. With her salary already double what it should have been, Halston was sometimes making twice again as much as the rest of the actors.³⁹ Worried that the show would close, and perplexed about an understudy getting so much more than a regular cast member, Elliott went to Thom Shovestull:

I had a budget based on the correct interpretation, and they said, no, [the adjusted salaries are] based on every three weeks gross, not on one week, read it carefully. Well, I thought, obviously they know more than I. They're the professionals, that's why you hire people like that . . . Those of us who had no experience whatsoever in those matters, I mean, we didn't know the difference.⁴⁰

By the fall, plans were being made to revive Times Square Angel and run it in repertory with Vampire Lesbians. Elliott called Equity to negotiate the actors' salaries. He asked if they could pay the present salary and do repertory, and Kenneth Greenwood of Equity advised him that the amount he was now paying was far above the minimum, and that Lawlor had been using the wrong rule to calculate the salary increments.

When Lawlor was made aware of his mistake, he agreed to work for several months gratis, then for a modest sum after that. He also made a cash settlement of \$5500 to the Vampire Lesbians company. Lawlor and Shovestull terminated their services on April 27, 1986, after which Kenneth Elliott took over as general manager.⁴¹ Elliott believes Lawlor's error cost the Vampire Lesbians company about \$45,000. He calculates investors could have been paid back by the end of the

summer, but Vampire Lesbians never grossed as consistently high as it did that first summer. Years went by before the company had accumulated the income to pay back its investment. To add to the problems with Odom and Lawlor, an accusation was made in print that box office manager Mark Sylvester had embezzled \$19,000 before he left his job and disappeared.⁴² Elliott's gracious manner under this fire storm is all the more noteworthy.

If Busch and Elliott had not decided to run Times Square Angel in repertory with Vampire Lesbians, they might not have found out about the overpayment to the actors until it was too late. But now the weekly operating expenses for Vampire Lesbians were being met, and Busch began to work on expanding Times Square Angel. The running time at the Limbo Lounge had been fifty-five minutes, the longest of the Limbo plays so far, but still not long enough to charge Off-Broadway ticket prices.

Busch's first impulse was to take Irish O'Flanagan on a trip to the past to show how she got to be so hard-boiled. He wrote a series of flashback vignettes, beginning with her childhood, but the structure was too unwieldy. Elliott suggested that Busch borrow the format used in It's a Wonderful Life. Rather than a series of flashbacks, Irish's earlier life could be told in a prologue. The plot would follow a chronological order of events, leading up to where the earlier version of Times Square Angel began.

The new prologue of Times Square Angel ran about twenty-eight minutes. Found at curtain rise in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York is the twelve-year-old Irish, a feisty but warm-hearted tomboy. She is accepted into Marberry School but

cannot attend when her mother dies and her drunken father makes her go to work in a zipper factory. After five years in the zipper factory, she takes the advice of her friend Cookie and joins a burlesque show. She abandons her drunken father, falls in love the wealthy Dexter Paine the Third, and is bought off by his blue blood mother. Irish becomes bitter and tough, brandishing her fist in the air like Scarlet O'Hara in Gone with the Wind as movie music throbs and builds to a crescendo around her:

Irish. Dexter, I just couldn't buck 'em. I can't buck the system. Rich people gotta stay rich and poor people gotta get rich . . . I guess I am something of a monster. I know now that money is the most important thing in this world. You gotta have it and now I have a little and I'll get more . . . and I'll be stronger and stronger and so rich that I won't let anyone near enough to hurt me ever again. If I'm to be a monster, well so be it but I promise all of you who made me this way, that I'll be the best dressed monster in this whole damn world!⁴³

Irish becomes more grasping and selfish as she alienates friends and co-workers.

Finally she reaches the point of self-absorption where the Limbo version began. Still played in one act, the enlarged version ran seventy two minutes.

Unfortunately, the Off-Broadway Times Square Angel was a weaker play than the earlier version. The new section seemed diffuse and tacked on. Characters drifted in and out, adding little besides more narrative. Albert's first appearance was now halfway through the play, and was a bit jarring. Moreover, with so many new scenes and roles, his impact as a character was weakened. Since the script now covered a ten year period (1938-1948), there was no "present" stage time, and the later scenes in the Hotel Windemere lost some their imaginative play.

Understudies Julie Halston and Michael Belanger were given roles, and Ralph Buckley returned as Chick the gangster. As the shows would be done in repertory, Whitehill designed a cityscape construction that could be placed on top of the

Vampire Lesbians set. The second half of the play used the Life magazine backdrop he had designed for the Limbo Lounge. Debra Tennenbaum, who had designed costumes for the Limbo Lounge production of Coma, did the same for the current show.

Times Square Angel began previews on Tuesday, 3 December, and opened on 11 December. The reviews were generally good, with the production getting a more positive response than the play. The Times noted:

This show has a heart of gold. It concludes with a scene being repeated like a movie reel that has run out of control. That's not a bad description of the whole send-up.⁴⁴

In one of the more perceptively written pieces of criticism, Laurie Stone of the Village Voice observed:

Times Square Angel is a drag show, but of genre, not gender. It doesn't matter whether men or women play the parts; the attitude toward the material is the thing, and it's beautifully consistent, entirely of a piece, and not for one moment hostile to women, as in sentimental, nostalgic drag. With his gangly legs (pardon, "pins"), expressing centuries of scrabbling-dame sinew and vulnerability, Busch is sweet, clownish, and vampy.⁴⁵

Stone noted two elements that were becoming distinctive characteristics of Busch's Limbo work. The first is a borrowing of ingredients from grade "B" Hollywood movies made during the Hollywood's classic era. Times Square Angel, Psycho Beach Party, The Lady in Question, and Red Scare on Sunset would all find their inspiration in the Hollywood studio product often appropriated by camp. The second element which was emerging was the Busch persona, a consistent personality which colored all his roles. He describes it as

a diva coming to town with her nutty cast . . . [I am] grand but masking humble origins. So I can be tough when it's required to get things moving but with a veneer of the great lady, so I can also fit in with the upper classes and

pull it off. But I'll probably tire of that and have to revert to my cheaper nature. I'm tough, but I'm also very vulnerable. All this is a version of who I am in real life. I'm sharp as a tack but also kind of dizzy, apt to get things the wrong way. But when it comes down to it I'll succeed. I can be as glamorous as any woman, wear clothes as well as any woman, that's part of the persona. I think they [the audience] enjoy that. That I can be the broad clown yet also pull it off looking swell. That's what makes me different from any other female impersonator working today.⁴⁶

The Busch persona would continue to be refined and polished over the next four years, reaching its fullest embodiment in The Lady in Question.

Times Square Angel gave three performances a week, but could not attract audiences. Even though reviews had been supportive, the schedule was confusing to a theatre-going public that was not used to repertory. With the stimulus of the holiday season gone, Vampire Lesbians clearly proved to be more popular. On Sunday, 9 February, Times Square Angel closed after having given a total of eight previews and twenty-eight performances.

The company now began to experience their first long run, and they evidently enjoyed it. During the summer, they went out after the show almost every night. If there was any friction within the cast, it was prompted by Meghan Robinson. As previously noted, several months into the run Robinson began to get sick. She suffered from constant respiratory problems. At one point her cough was so intense that she damaged several ribs and had to wear a brace. Blocking had to be changed and stage business cut to allow her to continue performing. By 20 November, Halston had gone on for her forty-three times, and by the time Robinson left the cast the following April, Halston had done over one hundred performances. Several members of the company felt that Robinson was getting bored with the show and that the illnesses were feigned. They were annoyed by her behavior and thought she was

not acting in a professional manner: Andy Halliday, for example, was upset that Robinson still chain smoked while complaining of chest problems.

What no one in the company knew at this point was that Robinson was genuinely ill. Three years later, during the run of The Lady in Question, she would be hospitalized for pneumocystic pneumonia, an AIDS-related disease. In retrospect, Busch believes that she was suffering from AIDS-related opportunistic infections as early as 1985. But if Robinson knew that she was HIV positive during the Off-Broadway run of Vampire Lesbians, she did not tell anyone in the company. Unaware of Robinson's condition, the company believed that she was acting like a prima donna, and any compassion they might normally have felt shrivelled before her demanding nature. Busch and Elliott, who adored her, made excuses for her absences and her sometimes provoking behavior, which only increased the resentment felt by other members. But whether Robinson was ill or not, when she was performing, she was always dependable and consistent. And consistency soon became a chronic problem for the cast.

Because Vampire Lesbians was a unsubstantial piece of material with little to challenge the actor, Busch and the others became bored and, as the run proceeded, invented new bits of business. Soon the bits grew more obvious and mechanical; the production began to lose the core of organic truth and spontaneity that made the burlesque so enjoyable. Fortunately, the show was taped 7 December and 31 January, and when the cast compared their performances to the opening night tape, they were horrified at how broad they had become. They immediately began to work at making their work more grounded and disciplined.

Busch charts the development of his Vampires performance in three parts:

The first six months of my run got broader. Kathie Carr was stage managing and was horrified. Everything was overdrawn . . . Everything got a double-take . . . The next six months was a process of weeding out and cutting out and bringing it down . . . not so excessive, cut the bits, just tell the story. After about a year, I knew the play so well that I would get into this thing where I didn't know my next line. I think every actor should stay in a role for six months. For me, personally, six months and I can still discover things in a role. Then I start having problems with concentration. By the eighteenth month, I was really getting loony.⁴⁷

Busch's boredom prompted a return to the Limbo Lounge with a new play. Pardon My Inquisition opened on 16 May 1986 and was initially scheduled to run for three week-ends. The cast played a Friday and Saturday evening performance of Vampire Lesbians and then ran crosstown to appear at the Limbo Lounge.

The title Pardon My Inquisition, another Ed Taussig invention, had been appearing on the Vampire Lesbians show curtain for the past year. When Busch finally got around to writing it, he tried for a style he had not attempted before:

That real hokey, bawdy-talking Shakespeare where there is lots of "love," and there is all this crotch grabbing that they do in bad Shakespeare, with the cod piece and all that.⁴⁸

The play's inspiration was another Sardou vehicle for Bernhardt, La Sorcière (1903). Although Busch had never actually read it, he had seen pictures of Bernhardt in the production. The original Sardou play concerned Zoraya, a Moorish gypsy accused of sorcery and burned at the stake by the Church. Busch's play had little to do with La Sorcière. Pardon was set in Toledo during the Inquisition and opens with the wild prostitute Maria Garbonza (Busch) and her freewheeling cohorts, drinking and carousing at the local tavern. Maria loves Don Arturo (Kolodner), but he is in love with La Marquesa del Drago (Busch again). Jealous of Don Arturo's infatuation,

Maria informs La Marquesa's senile old husband (Aulino) of his wife's infidelity, and La Marquesa is condemned to die at the stake. But after Maria's younger brother is killed in a knife fight, Maria repents, visits the prison where La Marquesa is awaiting her execution, and switches places with her--they look alike. As Whitehill's flyer proclaims, "She lived as a whore, but she died as a lady!"

The plot source of Pardon is really A Tale of Two Cities with the subplot of Maria's brother added from the 1937 Bette Davis vehicle Marked Woman. Whitehill did a backdrop stretched on a old gilt frame, a hodge-podge of famous Spanish painters like Goya and Dali. In the best kitsch tradition, the painting was done on black velvet, and the artist's signature on the bottom spelled "Olé." Part of the frame was charred as if it had been thrown in a fire. Costumes were co-ordinated by Robert Locke, who was the dresser at Vampire Lesbians.

Only running forty minutes, Pardon was intended as a summer romp, a diversion for Busch's fans at the Limbo Lounge. Busch admits:

We couldn't spend any money on this . . . it had the feeling of a tired melodrama being performed by a tacky company on tour. It is so hokey, hackneyed. We did it very quickly, I think Ken rehearsed the whole thing in a week.⁴⁹

But the joke of a tired road show with moldy costumes and less than proficient actors seems to have been lost on critics like Jacques le Sourd, who noted that

"amateurishness is a camp staple, naturally, but it wears thin awfully fast."⁵⁰

Pardon simply did not have the wit or the imagination that previous Limbo productions had displayed. But the crowds at the Limbo Lounge did not seem to care; the audience heard on the 30 May videotape seems to be enjoying themselves immensely.

Anachronisms abound in Pardon. Andy Halliday appeared as a flamboyantly gay waiter at the local tavern:

Vincenzo. (enters) I'm ready for your drink orders, gentlemen. I'd like to recommend our special house sangria. It's tangy and pungent and comes garnished with freshly cut orange slices. It's really quite superb.⁵¹

Pardon is, without doubt, the most sexually explicit show the company has ever produced. As Maria, Busch performs fellatio on Bobby Carey on stage. Although it is staged so that Busch is blocked from the audience by Carey's body, this moment is the only time a sex act is ever enacted in a Limbo play.

Pardon contained no striking moments of gender juggling, a feature that was beginning to distinguish Limbo's most imaginative work. Busch had a clever moment in the prison where Maria and La Marquesa appeared together, with the help of a double. The double masked Busch's mouth from the audience; when Busch spoke it seemed as if the double was talking, and the effect was that Maria and La Marquesa were having a conversation. The device was obvious, a celebration of cheap theatrics, and the Limbo audience adored it.

Pardon's cast was uneven. Becky London, who had just replaced Meghan Robinson in Vampire Lesbians, made a strong impression playing several small roles; Michael Belanger was quite good as Busch's younger brother; and Aulino and Buckley turned in their usual adept work. Missing and missed were Julie Halston, Theresa Marlowe and Robinson. The rest of the cast played multiple roles with varying accents and competence.

Although Pardon was originally scheduled to run for only three weeks, the demand for tickets prompted a week's extension, and it closed on 7 June 1986. With

a total of nine performances and no revivals, it remains the least performed Limbo production, but Busch points out he was not aiming for theatrical innovation, that Pardon was mounted for a club, not an Off-Broadway theatre, and that it fulfilled its purpose, as a diversion both for the cast and Theatre-in-Limbo's fans. However, while Busch defends Pardon and is evidently fond of it, Elliott and some of the others on the production team remain indifferent about the production's merits.

After Pardon closed, the company returned to Vampire Lesbians. The play had been running almost a year, and Busch and Elliott were soon faced with the problem of cast replacements. Robinson was the first of the original cast to leave, but by the summer of 1987, when the company opened in Psycho Beach Party, the cast of Vampire Lesbians was composed entirely of replacements. Although Vampire Lesbians was not originally written for the company, Coma was, and the two plays were double cast with specific actors in mind. As Busch observed:

My company, say what you will, does have strange acting ranges and they can do peculiar things . . . the roles are written so closely for specific actors that it has always made a problem for replacements. The shows have always been diminished by replacements, some less than others.⁵²

Tom Aulino's departure was an example of how doubling had to be re-adjusted. Aulino had played Ian in Coma as a Ringo Starr sadsack, with a Liverpool accent and a bedraggled charm. In Vampire Lesbians, he played Oatsie Carewe, the garrish newspaper columnist, in drag. When Aulino had to be replaced, a more traditional doubling of Ian and King Carlisle, the Hollywood matinee idol, was chosen. Elliott found it much easier to find a juvenile to play both young roles (Ian and King) and a character man to play Sebastian Loré and Oatsie Carewe.

When a company member departed, some of the zaniness went out of the show. Arnie Kolodner played Craig Prince the nutritionist in Coma, and a guard and chorus boy in Vampire Lesbians. While the roles were not demanding, when Kolodner left the cast, Busch noted:

Something is missing, a certain kind of smarmy charm. Just having a good looking musical comedy juvenile in the part won't have that.⁵³

Kolodner's easy manner, throw-away delivery, and slightly narcissistic air commented on the image of leading man as well as on the character he was playing. Even Bobby Carey, an untrained actor, added to the eccentricity of a Theatre-in-Limbo performance with his strikingly handsome appearance and his thick New Jersey accent that emerged no matter what the historical period.

In the acting edition of Vampire Lesbians, Busch adds a warning in his author's note:

Along with the innocence of a fairy tale, these plays also have qualities of old fashioned burlesque sketches. They are full of opportunities for double takes, sculls, pratfalls and other comic "shtick." They should be played flamboyantly, with a sense of almost operatic intensity but more important with honesty and a sense of reality. Nothing will kill the humor of these pieces more quickly than performers who "wink at the audience" and signal that they are in on the joke.⁵⁴

Busch had good reason to caution future casts about the excessive use of unmotivated comic business. As the run of Vampire Lesbians went into its third and fourth year, the performance became progressively broader and more labored.⁵⁵ As noted earlier, the original company had been guilty of comic self-indulgence, but Kathie Carr, as stage manager, gave constant notes and kept the actors disciplined. When Carr left to stage manage Psycho Beach Party, her replacement, James Griffith, was

not as obsessive about performance notes, and the replacement actors, like the company members, were tempted to overplay.

Part of the problem was the script itself. Vampire Lesbians was not dependable material: the humor was in the delivery, not the text. In addition, the make-up of the audience was changing. This new audience, mostly tourists, was not as vocal as the Limbo fans, and the camp references and performance style sometimes left them baffled. The actors often reacted to the audience's silence by pushing even more; the performance became a parody of a parody.

Elliott had initially given the production a structure, for the actors' characterizations as well as for the scenes themselves, which endowed the play with the appearance of more weight than it actually contained. This quality was what made the company's style unique--camp with commitment. But as the run continued, Elliott became involved in other Limbo productions, as well as projects of his own. He could no longer oversee Vampire Lesbians as often as he had.

Looking back on the run, Elliott ruefully notes that Vampire Lesbians got away from him:

I found that the show was embarrassing to me at times. I would go, and of course, it wasn't at all remotely the show that I intended or wanted it, in the beginning, to be. But if you only have three or four days to put in a replacement, and gradually everybody in it is a replacement . . . no one had really rehearsed it together. They had just had a put-in rehearsal as they went along. The quality of the show really suffered.⁵⁶

When Vampire Lesbians finally closed on 27 May 1990, it had given seventeen previews and two thousand and twenty-four performances, breaking the record for the longest running Off-Broadway non-musical play.⁵⁷

Several factors contributed to its lengthy run, not least being the provocative title that Ed Taussig had thought up. Out-of-towners were intrigued and Vampire Lesbians soon became a tourist attraction. The location itself was significant. The Provincetown Playhouse was situated in an area that was already a mecca for visitors: Greenwich Village. MacDougal Street was a busy thoroughfare and Vampire Lesbians enjoyed a steady walk-in business. Once inside the theatre, audiences found that the play was good natured and playful. Michael Musto in Downtown notes:

The amazing media approval of Busch, even from the straightest of old fogies, made him into an acceptable adventure for everyone, many of whom found themselves snickering into their three-piece-suit collars for the first twenty minutes before letting go with shameless out-and-out hysteria that said they were happy to be part of Busch's breakthrough.⁵⁸

Roy Cockrum, a cast replacement who did over eight hundred performances and observed audiences during the last two years of the run (1988-1990), adds that tourist expectation was usually fulfilled:

They got to see things they don't see and hear things they don't hear. Being in the Village was a heightening experience for them. People felt they had gotten what they came to the Village to get. And it didn't gross them out. It wasn't offensive.⁵⁹

Titillation (the title and drag performance) in the context of more traditional entertainment (sketch comedy) proved to be a winning combination.

Another factor aiding the record breaking run, in addition to the show's appeal, was the extremely low weekly operating costs, about \$12,000. The cast was getting minimum salaries and on favored nations contracts. The rent on the Provincetown Playhouse was inexpensive, and Kenneth Elliott, as general manager, learned to keep expenses down.

Two other invaluable contributions to show's initial success were made by Busch's performance and the Times review. But perhaps one of the most important reasons for the play's longevity was simply that Elliott wanted to keep it running. As the years went by, Vampire Lesbians began to pass landmark performances, and the opportunity to set a new record became a distinct possibility. Even with half-price tickets sold through the Theatre Development Fund, business was erratic. While other managements might have closed down the play, Elliott maneuvered it through the bad months, in hopes that ticket sales during the holiday seasons would average out business to a break-even point. His strategy worked, and even though Vampire Lesbians went through long periods during which very little profit was made, it did continue its run to achieve a new record.

When Busch and his company left, the production that remained never again achieved the combination of elements that made the artifice sparkle. While Vampire Lesbians was running and breaking records, Theatre-in-Limbo produced two more plays, Psycho Beach Party and The Lady in Question, far more sophisticated works that had much shorter runs. Even though these plays were not as financially successful, or appealed to as wide an audience, they were far more daring in their use of drag. But in the general theatre-going community, particularly outside of New York, Busch's reputation unfortunately still rests on Vampire Lesbians, a work that was conceived as little more than an amusement for him and his friends.

This study now turns to the play that Theatre-in-Limbo briefly attempted during the fall season at the Lounge, Gidget Goes Psychotic. But this time Busch

had taken Elliott's advice: he was going to play Gidget and he was going to go psychotic.

NOTES

1. D.J.R. Bruckner, review of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom by Charles Busch, New York Times, 20 June 1985.
2. One such scheme was suggested by Vince Esoldi, who was involved with putting together a show called Night of the Gypsies, to be held at the Red Parrot. Busch wrote a variety show featuring Limbo members called Follies, Vanities, Scandals! of 1985. According to Busch, Esoldi had told them he would be able to raise twenty thousand dollars to help move Vampire Lesbians if they would do the Red Parrot show for free. Busch and company had fun putting on the show, but no money was forthcoming from Esoldi and his investors.
3. Vampire Lesbians played at the Limbo Lounge on 22,23,29,30,31 March 1985. The company was on an Equity mini-contract.
4. Elliott agreed to give one or two percent of the profits to the Limbo Lounge if Vampires transferred Off-Broadway. Elliott recalls that Michael Gormley said he owed Jeannette Ianucci so much money that the checks should be made out to her.
5. See Chapter Three for an explanation of this phrase.
6. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 10 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
7. Barry Odom, Statement on circumstances of Limbo designs, DS [photocopy], 14 June 1984, property of author, New York City. In this statement, part of a legal action taken by Odom after Vampires opened for previews, Odom states that he was paid \$400 at the Limbo Lounge to design costumes. This money was to include expenses for shopping, fitting, and consulting. The money did not include a fee for Odom's services.
8. Julie Halston, interview by author, 27 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.
9. Elliott states that Busch first had the idea to re-write Coma while Times Square Angel was playing at the Limbo Lounge in December.
10. Busch was uncertain, at first, whether to play Fauna or Briar Rose, the Halston role. Andy Halliday convinced him to let Halston play Rose, because he had written it for her and she loved it so much. As a result, the character of Fauna was enlarged.

11. Charles Busch, "Sleeping Beauty, or Coma, 1985" TMs [photocopy], p. 5, property of author, New York City. The role of Anthea Arlo, not in the original version performed at the gala opening, was written for Theresa Aceves.
12. For the Off-Broadway production an original song was used, You Kissed Me, with lyrics by Kenneth Elliott and music by Tom Judson. The number was written as a parody of a Petula Clark song of the period and was recorded by an old Northwestern classmate, Angelina Réaux. For the Los Angeles production (1990), Elliott returned to the Hancock number.
13. Charles Busch, "Sleeping Beauty, or Coma, 1985," p. 15. Busch used this situation, a lesbian sequence played by himself and a woman, in Myrtle Pope, but the sequence in Coma makes use of drag in a more sophisticated way.
14. Sleeping Beauty, or Coma was videotaped on 18 May 1985 at the Limbo Lounge. The Off-Broadway version was taped on 19 June 1985, later in June (?) with Halston substituting for Robinson, and again on 31 January 1986.
15. See Marjorie Garber, "Breaking the Code," in Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1992), 128-161. The cultural assumption that gender signs indicate sexual orientation is false; all male transvestities are not gay.
16. Busch's Limbo love scenes resorted to symbolic gestures: embraces, kisses on the cheek. Unless parodied, the combination of drag and physical expressions of heterosexuality strained the audience's suspension of disbelief.
17. As they had done with Vampires in March, the cast returned their salaries to Elliott, in order to facilitate the Off-Broadway move.
18. Charles Busch, interview by author, 28 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
19. Charles Busch, interview by author, 7 November 1991, tape recording, New York City.
20. Charles Busch, Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, (New York: Samuel French, 1985), 76.
21. Ken Elliott, interview, 10 August 1991.
22. After The Lady in Question, Marlowe changed her name back to Theresa Aceves. She appeared under "Aceves" when she performed in Times Square Angel at The Theatre for the New City in 1991.
23. Busch, Coma, 39.

24. Brian Whitehill, interview by author, 26 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
25. Ibid.
26. Andrew Ross, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture (New York: Routledge, 1989), 151.
27. Bruckner, New York Times, 20 June 1985.
28. Charles Busch, interview, 29 September 1991.
29. Bruckner, New York Times, 20 June 1985.
30. One or two critics, notably John Simon of New York (22 June 1985), gave a dissenting view. Simon, in fact, walked out after Coma. His criticism of Busch since Vampires has become more affirmative.
31. Robert Feldberg, review of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, by Charles Busch, Record (New Jersey), 20 June 1985.
32. Ibid.
33. Craig Rowland, "Some Day My Prince Will Come, " review of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom by Charles Busch, Connection, 19 August 1985.
34. Howard Karren, "Fast Track," New York, 3 March 1986, 42.
35. Sy Syna, " Satire in Busch's 'Vampires' Nips Rather than Bites," review of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom by Charles Busch, New York City Tribune, 1 July 1991.
36. Keith Dawson, "A Comedy with Fangs," review of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom by Charles Busch, Downtown Manhattan, 24 June 1985.
37. The circumstances, terms, and figures in this case have been taken from Ken Elliott's file on Odom, which contains Odom's statement, the correspondence between Odom's and Elliott's lawyers, and the legal release finally agreed upon.
38. If an Off-Broadway show grossed over a certain amount, an additional increment was paid to the actor. In the previous Off-Broadway Equity contract, the increment was based on a three-week cumulative gross. In the new contract, it was based on a one-week gross. Lawlor added up the gross for three weeks (i.e. \$60,000 total gross for a \$20,000 weekly gross) rather than the one week gross, and paid the increment based on \$60,000 rather than \$20,000. According to Elliott, instead of paying the actors an extra \$50 a week, they were being paid \$450 or \$500 a week.

39. According to Halston, she was making between \$600-800 a week, far above what the other cast members were getting.
40. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 12 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
41. The information on the Lawlor episode is taken from Ken Elliott's files and includes correspondences between Elliott, Lawlor, Leonard Kolleeny (Elliott's lawyer), tax returns, and Lawlor's canceled check for fifty-five hundred dollars, made out to the Vampire Lesbians partnership.
42. As reported in the New York Post (19 August 1986), Arthur Cantor, manager of the Provincetown Playhouse, accused Sylvester of the theft of \$19,000, when money and records were discovered missing after Sylvester's departure. Sylvester resigned in May after reporting a discrepancy of \$4,600 and agreeing to refund it himself. According to Elliott, Sylvester disappeared without repaying the missing sum. Cantor had to make good on the loss.
43. Charles Busch, Times Square Angel (New York: Samuel French), 27. On the videotape of this production, (shot on 25 January 1986), the audience responds with cheers when Busch gives this speech. This is the cult audience and their reaction is noteworthy. The spectator with a gay sensibility responds to both the camp element, which is funny in its use of movie dialogue clichés, and on a more seriously emotional level, to a situation that mirrors that of the marginalized individual. The distancing supplied by the camp humor mingles with empathy resulting from an identification with the stigmatized person; another example of the effect and the emotion.
44. Walter Goodman, review of Times Square Angel by Charles Busch, New York Times, 17 December 1985.
45. Laurie Stone, "He Done Her Right," review of Times Square Angel by Charles Busch, Village Voice, 31 December 1985.
46. Charles Busch, interview by author, 28 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
47. Charles Busch, interview by author, 1 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
48. Charles Busch, interview by author, 7 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
49. Ibid.
50. Jacques le Sourd, "Busch Back at Camp with Inquisition," review of Pardon My Inquisition by Charles Busch, Gannett Westchester Newspapers, 4 June 1986.

51. Charles Busch, "Pardon My Inquisition, 1986," TMs [photocopy], p. 2, property of author, New York City.
52. Charles Busch, interview by author, 18 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.
53. Ibid.
54. Busch, Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, n.p.
55. Several cast replacements were interviewed for this study. Among them were Mark Hamilton and Roy Cockrum, who went on to do other Limbo productions. Hamilton's and Cockrum's combined tenure covers the last four years of the run. This results in a comprehensive picture of how the show evolved after the original cast left.
56. Ken Elliott, interview by author, 30 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
57. "Goings on About Town; The Theatre," New Yorker 21 May 1990. Second and third places for Off-Broadway long runs were held by Jack Heifner's Vanities (one thousand, seven hundred and eighty-four performances) and Genet's The Blacks (one thousand, four hundred and eight performances).
58. Michael Musto, Downtown (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 138.
59. Roy Cockrum, interview by author, 4 April 1991, tape recording, New York City.

CHAPTER FIVE

GIDGET GOES PSYCHOTIC: A CYCLE ENDS

In his curtain speech following a videotaped performance of Gidget Goes Psychotic at the Limbo Lounge (October 1986), Busch noted that "this ends for us a series of plays we started about three years ago."¹ At the time, Busch meant that the group of plays he had been announcing since the spring of 1984 had now all been presented: Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium, Times Square Angel, Coma, Pardon My Inquisition, and Gidget Goes Psychotic. But Busch's comment held true in more ways than he could have anticipated. Gidget Goes Psychotic was the company's final production to play the Limbo Lounge. By the time the expanded version, renamed Psycho Beach Party, opened at the Players Theatre the following July, the Limbo Lounge had changed hands.² This had profound ramifications for the company. Theatre-in-Limbo had lost what Busch often called his "New Haven," a place to try out new material. Mounting a new play would become considerably more difficult.

Like all the Limbo Lounge plays, Gidget Goes Psychotic was announced in a curtain speech before a line of dialogue had been written. Busch would often try out play titles and plot situations on his audiences to see what kind of reaction they got. Furthermore, by generating excitement about upcoming events, he enlarged the mailing list.³ When Busch first mentioned Gidget in the spring of 1984, he noted

how the crowd roared with approval and was persuaded to develop a script.

Unfortunately, the first draft was problematic and the play was withdrawn.

Busch was not familiar with any Gidget movies when he wrote the first version of Gidget Goes Psychotic. Rather than film genre parody, it was an uneasy mixture of melodrama and farce. The play uses more theatrical references than film. In fact, there seems to be a closer connection to the Chicago plays, Sister Act (siamese twins) and A Woman's Picture (transvestism and echoes of Tennessee Williams), than to the other plays in the Limbo cycle. Busch's role, a male heterosexual transvestite named Alana Anders, is a supporting character and, as written, affords him little opportunity for comic invention.⁴

Gidget was set aside for two years, and several changes were immediately apparent in the 1986 Limbo Lounge version. The character of Alana Anders had been cut, and now that Busch was playing the title role, Gidget had become a stronger focal point of the play. The plot was totally revised. The cast of characters was now predominantly young; Gidget's single parent, Mrs. Forrest, functioned as the only adult in the play. Busch added a movie starlet, Bettina Barnes, childlike in behavior if not in years. A subplot was added in which two male surfers find out that they are sexually attracted to each other. Characters such as Gidget's friend, Marvel Ann, only referred to in the earlier version, were now given major stage time.

While a re-worked plot, character adjustments, and structural changes were great improvements, the truly striking aspect of the 1986 version, in terms of Limbo's development, involved a series of production choices. What follows is a selective description of the videotaped Limbo Lounge performance, noting in particular several

moments in which performance choices begin to incorporate a momentary dislocation of perception that Richard Hornby, in Drama, Metadrama, and Perception, calls a significant metadramatic experience for the audience.⁵ Although Busch, Elliott, and the designers had flirted with this technique from the company's beginnings, Gidget Goes Psychotic contains the boldest aesthetic choices they had yet attempted. This piece was Limbo's most metatheatrical production; Gidget celebrated cheap theatrics by reveling in its failed attempt to maintain illusion.⁶ The following analysis concentrates on videotaped performances, for it is in production that these metatheatrical sequences are evident. The emphasis on the Limbo Lounge version is made, in part, to continue a chronological narrative. Moreover, the Off-Broadway production did not alter the sequences under consideration.

The play opens with a group of California surfers romping on the beach: Stinky (Bobby Carey), his friend Provoloney (Andy Halliday), Nicky (Michael Leitheid), Dee Dee (Lanette Hohl), and Moondoggie (Arnie Kolodner).⁷ But all is not well; someone is attacking unsuspecting people on the beach while they are sleeping, and shaving off all their body hair. The kids run off and Busch enters as the pigtailed Gidget. In one of the few instances in which a Limbo character directly addresses the audience, Gidget introduces herself:

Gidget. I'm supposed to meet my girlfriends, Larue and Marvel Ann here at the beach. Marvel Ann calls it a "man hunt." I don't know what's wrong with me. I like boys but not when they get all icky and unglued over you. I don't know, maybe I need some hormone shots. Honestly, we always had such a good time before, why do we have to spoil it all now.⁸

The next scene introduces the great Kahoona (Ralph Buckley), the macho hero of the beach, and Moondoggie (Arnie Kolodner), a pre-med student who dropped out of

school ("My Dad hit the roof . . . more than anything I want his respect and I'll get that by bumming around with you").⁹ The surf bums run off and Gidget, her best friend Larue (Becky London) and Marvel Ann (Michael Belanger in drag) enter. Marvel Ann tries to coach her two friends in the art of attracting men on the beach.

This sequence is of interest because it contains, in metatheatrical terms, the most audacious moment of drag exposure in the play. Marvel Ann urges Gidget to change into her swimsuit. Gidget tells her friends to hold up a blanket. They oblige and with the blanket upstage of her, she takes off her top in full view of the audience. When Busch removes his halter, there is actually a murmur of shock from the audience, followed by a howl of delight. Busch contemplates his hairless chest and stares disconsolately out at the audience. He seems to be talking to them rather than his fellow actors:

Gidget. I'm hopeless [*big laugh*]. I'm built just like a boy [*bigger laugh*]. I wonder if I'll ever fill out [*another big laugh*].¹⁰

As already noted, Busch's dialogue often emphasizes the pretense of drag. For example, in the Off-Broadway Times Square Angel prologue Eddie wants Irish to stowaway with him on a freighter ("I bet we could disguise you as a boy. I bet you could look just like a fella").¹¹ Busch's gender play has also been noted in Theodora (see Chapter Three). But here in Psycho Beach Party, Busch makes a daring choice in drag strategy. When Busch faces his audience with a naked torso and pouts, "I'm built just like a boy," he is flaunting his sexuality to comment on gender. His male chest momentarily eradicates any drag elements in his costume (wig, make-up, dress). Rather than a construction of costume elements to maintain

illusion, this moment epitomizes Busch's most imaginative work with what Mark Franko calls:

a . . . [manipulation] of sexuality's signs . . . ambiguity shifts from the question of sexuality per se to the identities of genders as shapers of feeling from within experience.¹²

Critic Robert Feldberg noted this moment in the Off-Broadway version:

The moment [Busch's exposure of his chest] is an example of Busch's two-level approach to transvestism. He's a skilled actor, and his gestures and movements are subtly feminine. You accept Chicklet as a sweet teen. Yet the slender, long-faced Busch doesn't try to hide the fact that he's a man--the dual-gender image is the play's running joke.¹³

Following this sequence, the beach scene returns to a more conventional comic treatment.

Later that same day, Kahoona and Gidget are alone. When he describes a red kite in the sky, Gidget transforms into her alter ego, Ann Bowman--the word "red" seems to trigger the conversion. The Bowman characterization, with the throaty growl of Tallulah Bankhead and the exaggerated poses of a femme fatale, allowed Busch to indulge in the more traditional drag persona of the aggressive, flamboyant diva. Kahoona, the macho surfer, turns out to be a sexual masochist, who enthusiastically responds to Bowman's sadistic manner. Gidget comes to her senses, doesn't remember the Bowman transformation, and leaves an intrigued Kahoona to ponder the mystery.

Gidget goes home, and her mother, Helen Forrest (Meghan Robinson) enters. In her make-up and wig Robinson bore an uncanny resemblance to the image of Joan Crawford in Mommie Dearest, and the Limbo audience cheered in recognition.¹⁴

When Gidget is refused a surfboard and swears in frustration, Helen realizes that her daughter may be becoming interested in men and unleashes her fury:

Mrs. Helen. (in a demonic rage) You think men are beautiful. Well, take a look at this, Missy. *(she pulls from her cleavage a jock strap)* For years I've kept this in a drawer, anticipating this very moment. Do you know what this is?

Gidget. No.

Helen. It's a peter belt. This is the pouch that holds their swollen genitalia. Isn't this beautiful? Isn't this romantic? *(she slaps Gidget with the jock strap repeatedly.)*

Gidget. Stop, stop.

Helen. (throws the jock strap at Gidget) You are a very foolish girl. And to think I spent long hours toiling over that veal scallopini.

(Helen exits. Gidget stares at the jock strap and whimpers.)

Gidget. Mommy, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. *(starts growling and making animal noises in baby talk)* She can't treat me this way. She's so mean and I'm too little to fight back. I can't . . . I can't let people hurt me . . . I'm . . . I'm . . . I'm so angry . . . I *(she burst into demonic laughter.) (as Ann Bowman)* I'm alive! I'm alive! Ann Bowman lives!!!

*(Blackout)*¹⁵

On the videotape, Robinson is so flagrantly excessive in her emotional outbursts that she, rather than Busch becomes the camp centerpiece in Gidget. Her extravagance actually compliments Busch's manner by making him seem more natural. But what makes the performance of this scene unique is the emotional investment Busch and Robinson bring to it. Their work illustrates the basic elements of the emerging Theatre-in-Limbo acting style: a heightened moment that is nevertheless portrayed with genuine commitment.

Back at the beach, the kids meet Bettina Barnes (Theresa Marlowe), a starlet running away from her studio to study acting with Lee Strasberg in New York. She

is traveling incognito and has rented a house on the beach. Busch filled her dialogue with non-sequiturs and "dumb blonde" responses:

Bettina. How would you like a job for the summer?

Larue. I don't know Miss B. I've got a big reading list to get through. And I'm still not finished with "The Idiot."

Bettina. (with great sympathy) You've got man trouble?¹⁶

Marlowe played Bettina as a Marilyn Monroe parody, over-emphasizing her consonants and speaking in a high breathy voice.

Stinky and Provoloney enter and try to come up with a story they can sell to Bettina Barnes. While improvising a love scene, they accidentally kiss and discover they are physically attracted to each other. A little later, Bettina Barnes receives a nasty telegram from her studio which gives Marlowe the opportunity to drop the Monroe act and do her trip, the tough, braying washer-woman. As she has done in every Limbo show, Marlowe instantly switches from fragile innocence to tough-as-nails belligerence. But in Gidget, Busch has made this transformation motivated by plot:

Bettina. [sees the telegram, speaks in a small, breathy tone] Oh wow, I'm scared to open it. It's from the studio. I've asked them to release me from my contract . . . [she asks Larue to read it to her, and listens, as the studio head brutally threatens her with legal action]

Larue. Oh Bettina, I'm so sorry. You poor little thing.

Bettina. [Marlowe now uses a harsh, guttural voice] That cheap son of a bitch, he can't do this to me. He slaps me with a subpoena and I'll have his balls on a plate.

Larue. (shocked) Bettina.

Bettina. (pacing, furious) After all the money I made for those bastards. They can't do this to me. I'm Bettina Barnes. I'm no flash in the pan that'll take any piece of

crap. [*Marlowe now deliberately slows her vocal rhythm, emphasizing each word*]
I'm playing hard ball, baby . . .

[*Stinky and Provoloney enter*]

Provoloney. Hey there, Miss Barnes, I hear you got some work you'd like us to do.

Bettina. (soft and vulnerable) Oh yeah, something. I needed something done. I'm so forgetful.¹⁷

This role captures the essence of Marlowe's trip: camp behavior suggested by play-acting, pretense, and masquerade. When they are alone, Moondoggie tells Gidget that he is worried about her erratic behavior. This segues into a tentative love scene, which includes another high point of metadramatic theatricality. As Moondoggie is flirting with Gidget, music is heard, and he suddenly breaks into song. But the voice singing clearly does not belong to the actor; Kolodner is lipsynching to a song from the soundtrack of the film Gidget. Busch beams as Kolodner leads him downstage and croons to him. Just as the second verse begins, the recording begins to repeat itself, as if a needle had encountered a scratch in the record and gotten stuck.

Kolodner seems oblivious to this and blithely lipsynchs the repeating lyric as if he were a malfunctioning mechanical doll. Suddenly there is a screeching noise as if the arm of a record player was being hastily and not too carefully lifted off the record--silence follows. Kolodner continues to mouth the words of the song, apparently unaware that the soundtrack has ceased. Busch glances at the audience and nudges Kolodner in the ribs. Suddenly aware of what has happened, Kolodner stops and looks sheepishly towards the wings while Busch gives a perplexed stare at the control booth. After a few uncomfortable moments, Kolodner says, "I guess I'll have to tell you how I feel."¹⁸

Just as the earlier bathing suit sequence seemed to intensify the illusion of Busch as a young girl by revealing his male torso, this device, by parodying the film technology of dubbing, used its mechanical failure to increase the intimacy of the love scene. Gidget shyly asks Moondoggie what happens when a boy is alone with a girl. The dialogue is gently spoken as romantic strings are heard on the sound system. As Gidget continues to prod Kolodner, his answers become increasingly more explicit:

Gidget. You take your clothes off, right?

Moondoggie. (lost in the moment) Uh huh.

Gidget. You got your clothes off. Then what?

Moondoggie. I caress her smooth satiny flesh. It glistens in the moonlight. She gently touches my muscles with her fingertips. Our bodies seem to float to the ground. We're entwined. Her fragile form nestles against my hard one and then I slowly slide my penis into her vagina. Simultaneously, she licks her index finger and inserts it up my rectum as I pump my penis against her blood engorged clitoris.

(During this last graphic part, Gidget is horrified and at the end of his speech, she screams as if in a horror movie and runs away.)

Moondoggie. (shouting after her) Gidget, come back!¹⁹

Moondoggie's clinical description serves to undercut the sentimentality of the scene. It also functions as a button, a comic event that successfully interrupts the love scene, and is not even referred to when Gidget and Moondoggie meet in the next scene.²⁰

Later, in Kahoona's hut, Moondoggie and Kahoona start to fight over Gidget and when she steps in to try to stop them, she is accidentally punched in the jaw by both men and knocked out. The actors execute this fight sequence in slow motion while slowly descending chords on strings are heard. The music is taken from Bernard Herrmann's score to Psycho, a musical theme that is almost as familiar to the

Limbo cognoscenti as the stabbing violins used in Janet Leigh's shower scene. Only after Busch's head hits the floor do the actors revert to natural speed. This movement technique distances the act of physical violence by focusing on the artificially slow movement and exaggerated looks of concern as Moondoggie and Kahoona realize what they've done. All the sequences under discussion either flaunt the tackiness of an old theatrical device or try to re-create a cinematic device in a theatrical context for comic effect. In either case, the result is a moment of alienation which adds a metatheatrical layer to the performance.

As Moondoggie and Kahoona try to revive Gidget, her mother appears. Helen is livid and orders Gidget home. The next scene is the big luau on the beach and everyone is doing the Limbo Rock. Jeff Veazey, the resident choreographer, turned the Limbo dance into his most ambitious work with the company: the dance steps built in complexity and exuberance, like a legitimate musical comedy number.²¹ Afterwards, in a talent show, Gidget and Larue sing The Lady in Red dressed in a siamese twins costume. The word "red" triggers Gidget's transformation into Ann Bowman and she whips out a razor to shave off everyone's body hair. Helen suddenly appears, and with the entire cast of characters on stage, Moondoggie hypnotizes Gidget to make her reveal the secret which causes her multiple personalities. In a flashback sequence, Helen is shown to be a prostitute. She tells the seven-and-a-half year old Gidget to go play while she entertains some customers. Gidget discloses that she had a twin brother and when she goes out to the playground, she dares her brother to go on a swing without holding onto the bars. When her brother falls and is killed, she blames herself.²² Now that Gidget has confessed,

she is cured, and Bettina is so moved by the story that she asks to buy the rights to film it. Stinky and Provoloney announce that they are lovers, and Stinky gives an anachronistic but "politically correct" speech on gay liberation.²³ Gidget and her mother are reconciled, and Larue decides to become a writer.

In the final scene, which serves as a coda, Kahoona says goodbye to Moondoggie. He is going to New York with Bettina, who turns out to be just as dominating as Ann Bowman had been. Gidget enters without pigtails and wearing a dress for the first time. Moondoggie asks her to call him by his real name, Jeff Mathews, and tells her he is going back to college. He gives Gidget his pin and asks her to be his steady girl. She accepts and they run off as the curtain comes down.

Like Times Square Angel, Gidget Goes Psychotic was a film genre parody, but in this case the source material came from two distinctly different genres: the beach blanket movies of the early 1960s and Hitchcock psychological thrillers like Marnie. Because it did not confine itself to one genre, the tight structure exhibited in the Limbo Lounge version of Times Square Angel was missing. But Busch was still able to fashion a play that could retain audience sympathy for its protagonist while it parodied its source material.

Brian Whitehill's designs aided in grounding the piece by emphasizing the theatrical setting of the production. Again working off the play's title without reading the script, Whitehill came up with a backdrop, painted in a shocking pink, which represented a Rorschach test ink blot. The abstract blot actually depicted a girl in a bikini with a surf board and waves splashing about her. She was wearing sun glasses and had a flip 1960s hairdo. As Whitehill observed:

It immediately told you what the point was. They were making fun of surfer movies, but it was about her psychotic troubles, as well. I like those immediate connections you can do with graphics. I think Rorschach tests are a very specific-looking object, and it answers all my other criteria, one big, giant, real object that can be enlarged, plus it sets the tone for the play, and it is a fun image.²⁴

But Whitehill's most arresting creation was shown for less than a minute of stage time.

Busch had written a brief scene where Gidget and the boys are seen surfing.

The Limbo manuscript simply reads:

Lights blackout and then come back on and we see Gidget and the boys riding the high waves, laughing and screaming with joy and excitement. [Blackout]. They enter again carrying Gidget on their shoulders, shouting "Hip Hip Hooray".²⁵

To create the surfing scene, Whitehill built several ground row pieces cut out to resemble waves. They were painted with blue swirls on a white background.

Attached on the front were circular cutouts that could be mechanically spun by actors hidden behind the ground row. The circles were painted with blue and white spirals that drew the spectator in by an optical illusion, when they were set in motion. This was a cinematic technique, sometimes used to suggest mental illness, as in Hitchcock's Spellbound.

When the lights blacked out for the surfing sequence, actors rushed on with the wave cutouts, crouched behind them and spun the circles. The lights came up to reveal Gidget, Kahoona, Moondoggie, Stinky, and Provoloney cavorting in the surf. The actors remained stationary, while they mimed keeping their balance on the surfboards. Their feet were hidden by the ground row, and with the circles spinning, the impression of a group of teenagers riding the surf was evoked with no attempt to

create scenic illusion. Busch jumped from one side of the stage to the other, as if Gidget were leaping from one surf board to another. All this was underscored by a blaring soundtrack of Rama Lama Ding Dong, a popular 60s rock and roll song.

This sequence, along with the others described above, made Gidget the most stylistically imaginative production the company had yet attempted. Rather than looking slick and professional, the production continually seemed to stop and point to a moment or theatrical trick as if the company were saying with a child-like pride, look what we came up with, isn't that clever? Yet this naiveté was matched with a self-deprecating sense of the absurdity of the effort; the element of camp was again infused throughout the production.²⁶

Vivien Leone complimented Whitehill's work with a light plot that accentuated secondary colors such as magenta, cyan (blue-green), and yellow in order to evoke the characteristic film color of the 1960s Gidget movies. When she told Elliott of her plan, he voiced concern that the actors would not be seen:

The thing about my relationship with Ken that is incredibly important, and also my relationship with Brian, is that there is an infinite amount of trust there. I don't find Ken to be very visual with design elements. He is very visual with blocking . . . I think that's also why he is so loyal to Brian and me, cause he knows he doesn't have to worry about that, he knows that we know what he's doing and will provide him with the right environment in which to do it.²⁷

Probably Elliott's greatest contribution to the production was making sure that the actors did not stray too far from a core of reality, so that the bizarre events in the play could still engage the audience. The entire company had acquired a greater confidence, and revealed an ability to believe in the moment, which distinguished its work from the self-consciousness that often makes camp and drag performance seem like a display of exhibitionism.

Under Elliott's direction, the company gave their most polished performance yet. Yet surprisingly, while Gidget was in rehearsal, Elliott did not have much hope for the show. Busch remembers:

Ken thought it was going to be horrible. He said we had struck out somehow, and I said, no, you're wrong. Every scene has a joke, every scene has a special thing in it.²⁸

Busch was right. Gidget's run at the Limbo Lounge was a great success, and performances quickly sold out. Becky London remembers that "the crowd at Limbo was wonderful. All you had to do was blink, and they loved you."²⁹ Arnie Kolodner recalls that audience members would arrive armed with giant beach balls and blow-up sharks and throw them on the stage.³⁰ After a total of nine performances on three weekends, Gidget closed on Sunday, 26 October 1986.

At first, there had been no plans to move Gidget to an Off-Broadway theatre.

As Busch explains:

Every one of these shows were thought of as just a showcase initially. We never thought that any one of them would have a future life . . . I have never gone into anything from the beginning thinking that we would try this out and then if it works out we will move it. It was always a surprise.³¹

With the positive response Gidget received, Elliott amended his opinion about the show and began thinking about an Off-Broadway transfer. He again teamed up with Gerald Davis as co-producer. Julie Halston, who was still unwilling to give up her job on Wall Street and had, therefore, not been written into the show, became associate producer. The Off-Broadway production of Gidget was budgeted at \$150,000.³² Elliott had learned a good deal since Vampire Lesbians; the budget allowed for a financial cushion to keep the show running so that word-of-mouth could

bring in business. The larger budget also meant more funds could be appropriated for an ad campaign.

During the spring, while most of the company returned to Vampire Lesbians, Gidget went through a series of script alterations, beginning with the title. Since the play was about to open in a commercial venue, Elliott began to worry about the possibility of being sued by Columbia Pictures, which had produced the original Gidget movies. The attorney for Theatre-in-Limbo, Leonard Kolleeny, put Elliott in contact with another lawyer, Russell Munvies, who wrote a legal document arguing for Theatre-in-Limbo's right to use the Gidget characters for satirical purposes.³³ Although Munvies felt the company was legally in a position to do so, he cautioned that Columbia Pictures might still sue. Rather than take on the expense of a lawsuit, Elliott and Busch decided to change the name of the play and create a little publicity, as well. Press agent Peter Sanders got Enid Nemy to mention in her New York Times "Broadway" column that Busch was launching a "Help Me Name The Play" contest. Letters were sent out to names on Limbo's mailing list, announcing the contest. Eventually, Busch himself came up with a title that satisfied him, Psycho Beach Party, but he kept the ruse of the contest going to garner more publicity. He even came up with a fictional winner, "Bette Stahl." A whole biography was created for "Ms. Stahl," and given out as press releases when she was announced as the winner.³⁴

Since Columbia Pictures also owned the rights to certain characters' names, such as Gidget, Moondoggie, and Kahoona, these had to be changed, as well. Gidget was now called Chicklet ("I've always been so darn skinny, a stick, a shrimp, so

when other girls turned into gorgeous chicks, I became a chicklet").³⁵ Moondoggie was changed to Starcat, Kahoona became Kanaka, and Larue and Stinky were now Berdine and Yo Yo. The rest of the characters' names remained the same.

The music had to be revised, as well. The song used for the lipsynched number included Gidget's name in the lyric. Elliott wrote the lyrics to a new song and got Tom Kochan to set it to music. The incidental music for Gidget had been completely pulled from soundtrack recordings.³⁶ Usually Elliott did not bother to get the rights for a specific musical selection:

I found that it was more trouble than it was worth inquiring about a little Off-Broadway show . . . This has always been my approach: if they say something, change the music or come to a deal. If they don't say something don't bother.³⁷

But motivated, in part, by the fear of various motion picture companies scrutinizing the production, Elliott decided to let Kochan write a completely new score, which included Berdine's theme (underscoring scenes where she reads aloud from her diary), Chicklet's transformation music (a parody of Bernard Herrmann's score for Psycho) and a re-orchestration of the "Limbo Rock," which used the tune heard on the original Chubby Checker recording. Chicklet's theme and the "Limbo Rock" were recorded by Michael Maguire and Ty Stephens, respectively.

Probably the most important change Psycho Beach Party underwent while readying itself for Off-Broadway was the replacement of John Glaser for Robert Locke as costume designer. Robert Locke was wardrobe master for Vampire Lesbians and had coordinated costumes for Pardon My Inquisition. But Busch felt that Locke's instincts were not quite right for the show:

Bobby Locke has a great sense of period design but flights of imagination I don't think are his forte. You tell him what you want, and he will come up with a variation of what you described and will do it quite well . . . But Psycho Beach Party required fantastic, imaginative costumes . . . they are fantastic characters . . . not really his trip.³⁸

The circumstances seemed to echo the Barry Odom/Vampire Lesbians episode, but the resolution was happier for all concerned. Although Locke was upset when he found out he would not be doing the Off-Broadway production, he still enjoyed working with the company and asked to be wardrobe master for Psycho Beach Party. Locke designed the company's next production, The Lady in Question, a play for which his talents were better suited.³⁹

In contrast to Locke, John Glaser brought a surrealistic sensibility to the costumes for Psycho Beach Party. Michael Belanger's costume as Marvel Ann illustrates the difference in their styles. The major problem here was that Marvel Ann was being played by a man and appeared in a bathing suit. The male genitalia had to be masked. Locke's solution was to put Belanger in a bathing suit that had an overskirt, which unfortunately gave Marvel Ann a dowdy, middle-aged look. Glaser created a bathing suit that was trimmed with a fringe of string, an odd choice for swim wear design, but which gave Belanger a sluttish appearance and suggested Marvel Ann's sophisticated and sexually aggressive character in the exaggerated and campy language of the play. Glaser's sense of humor and use of seemingly incongruous elements often illuminated character. Gidget was first seen in a black dress with bright polka dots, an expression of her mental state. Bettina Barnes was supposedly traveling incognito, but Glaser always had her dressed in black, with huge hats and veils trailing to the ground, bathing suits combined with rhinestone jewelry;

incognito or not, Bettina wanted to be noticed. Meghan Robinson as Helen Forrest made her first entrance wearing rings over plastic gloves, an obsessive homemaker and cleanliness freak. Busch was shocked at some of Glaser's choices:

You have to tone it down. In his original sketch for Meghan he not only had her wearing plastic gloves but a crown on her head like a [then current] t.v. commercial for Imperial Margarine. He went too far, but it was great because you could edit him down.⁴⁰

In fact, Glaser's costumes helped give Busch's characters definition by visually articulating the eccentric world of the play and the theatrical milieu in which it was presented; each costume had a small number of sequins sewn into the fabric, so the actors actually sparkled when they came on stage.

Eight months passed between Gidget Goes Psychotic and the first preview of Psycho Beach Party on 7 July 1987, which allowed Busch time to re-write and edit, as well as expand the hour long entertainment. The new material added another twenty-four minutes playing time. Busch sprinkled the dialogue with surfing terms and invented Malibu argot. Certain plot strands were neatly tied up. In the flashback sequence during Chicklet's hypnosis, when Helen is shown as a young prostitute, she was now wearing a red boa to justify Chicklet's reaction to the color red, and tells some unseen clients that her name is "Ann Bowman" to explain the origin of Chicklet's dominatrix alter ego. Generally, the new material was written either to clarify or embellish what was already there, rather than to experiment with different forms of presentation.

The theatre chosen to house Psycho Beach Party was the Players Theatre, only a block south of the Provincetown Playhouse on MacDougal Street, prompting one critic to write that "on MacDougal Street, Charles Busch is king."⁴¹ Whitehill

retained his Limbo Lounge designs for the Players, but another backdrop was added for the final scene between Chicklet and Starcat. Whitehill called this his "prom drop." Unlike the vibrant Rorschach drop with its hot pink color, this drop was soothing and romantic, and pictured a beach scene with the moon reflected on the water at night:

[It was like] prom night, with a big moon, all done in purples and lavenders with big palm trees on the side. It had little sparkles on it. Almost as if the trouble in her mind had calmed and left and the waters were now still. Vivien hooked up a light so that the moon actually glowed behind it.⁴²

Like the Provincetown Theatre, the Players Theatre had a proscenium arch, which Whitehill decorated. The proscenium was painted to resemble gray pearlized plastic (a material that was popular in the 60s) and stuck with various objects that a teenage girl like Chicklet might own: hair curlers, forty-five r.p.m. records, a jump rope, mirrors, hula hoops, Barbie dolls, beach thongs, t.v. dinner trays, and telephones. The center of the proscenium was again crowned with the Theatre-in-Limbo logo, while the downstage footlights were covered this time with plastic clam shells. The act curtain, which advertised the company's repertoire, had an overlay of chiffon which gave it a satiny appearance. Whitehill wanted the audience to have the impression that they were in a high school auditorium that had been taken over by the PTA. "The [parents] were putting on a show."⁴³

When Psycho Beach Party opened on 20 July 1987, Vampires had been running for more than two years and there was far more press coverage due to the company's growing visibility. Even out-of-town critics came to review the latest Theatre-in-Limbo effort. The general consensus held that Busch had much improved as a writer, and that the current offering was "his finest work to date."⁴⁴ The

critics also found that "the acting and direction here are more precisely pitched than they have been in the company's previous work."⁴⁵ Most critics had not seen Busch's solo pieces nor the Limbo version of Times Square Angel, and with only the sketch comedy of Vampires to use in comparison, Psycho Beach Party certainly showed more skill in comic structure and greater attention to plot development. The New York Times noted:

Where Vampires Lesbians cohered as a loose-jointed series of skits, Psycho Beach Party carries its amusing plot premise of a Gidget-like protagonist with a Jekyll-Hyde split personality through a dozen swift hairpin turns without losing its basic thread.⁴⁶

The Times critic, like most reviewers, concluded with a comparison between Busch and Ludlam, who had died of AIDS on 28 May 1987:

If Mr. Busch's brand of camp theatre has grown in craft, it still lacks the high style and classical aspiration of Charles Ludlam's theatre of the ridiculous. Right down to its insipid theme song, sung by Michael Maguire in a perfect parody of Jack Jones, to its surfside set of rotating cardboard waves to its Rorschach [sic] inkblot backdrop, Psycho Beach Party revels in trash for trash's sake.⁴⁷

Clive Barnes sounded a variation on Stephen Holden of the Times when he wrote that "Ludlam transformed the things he affectionately mocked and reaffirmed their essential inner life. Busch makes fun of the already funny."⁴⁸ But one review, in Manhattan Spotlight, found the inevitable comparisons unfair:

Critics have been known to use terms like "deconstructivist" in describing Mr. Ludlam's best work. He was never less than avant-garde, while Mr. Busch is simply a great camp parodist, and his comedy is far more mainstream--attested to by the two-plus years his Vampire Lesbians of Sodom has been on the boards. It takes more than a coterie audience or cult following to keep a play in the black for 500 performances. The symbols that do bear witness to the artistry in Mr. Busch's work can be more clearly seen in the design on the proscenium of the Players Theater: on either side of the stage stand identical panels, resembling upright surfboards and Egyptian temple artifacts. From a distance, expressionistically distorted, colorless, abstract faces on the artifacts

appear to be a take-off on primitive art . . . a closer look reveals . . . the materials [to be] mere "garbage," representing the transformation of a consumerist culture's debris. Like the panels, Charles Busch's art recycles trash in order to transform and present it while keeping its origins intact: trash.⁴⁹

Generally, the New York critics found Psycho Beach Party to be a pleasant summer entertainment, even if they did not fully appreciate Busch's trash aesthetic.

Most reviews praised Meghan Robinson, although possibly because of her deep voice, height (five foot, nine inches), large frame, and intense delivery, more than one critic mistook her for a female impersonator.⁵⁰ Audience response to Robinson (as recorded on the videotapes of the *Limbo* and *Off-Broadway* production) was almost as strong as it was for Busch himself. Busch notes:

The public just loves a campy woman, more than a drag queen. When you get a strong, gutsy, low-voiced woman who really can do camp, for some reason that gets the public even more than a guy in drag . . . Even in a drag situation like this . . . I think gay men appreciate that [Robinson] is competing with a drag performer and can hold her own, can be equal with the guy, equal flamboyance, equal strength, equal balls . . . That's why I think it is so much more interesting than if you had a guy in drag playing Joan Crawford, that would be so obvious.⁵¹

Although she actually appeared in few scenes, Robinson's forceful style and her uncanny physical similarity to Joan Crawford turned her role into a tour de force.

Several critics began to take Busch's work seriously. Laurie Stone of the Village Voice wrote a particularly perceptive piece about him. Stone begins by defining three separate types of drag performance. The first is epitomized by the British drag artist, Danny LaRue, in which transformation from male to female is achieved by great effort, reassuring the audience that men and women are not alike. The second tradition is characterized by Charles Pierce, in which drag becomes "slumming in femininity," because the impersonation plays up the loneliness, egotism

and self-abuse of the subject. In the third category, which Stone calls far happier, she includes Busch, Ludlam, La Grand Scena, and Blooplips:

Busch likes to play feisty feminists, and his portrayals are always affectionate. He not only enjoys the femme part of himself, he sees it as admirable, theatrical, emotionally expressive, receptive, and seductive. Unlike LaRue and Pierce, Busch's drag doesn't disguise that he's a man . . . In Busch's art, to go from a boy to a girl or girl to boy is not an arduous climb [LaRue] or a decadent fall [Pierce] but a pass through a door inside the self . . . His unembarrassed fantasies of otherness invite the audience to indulge in their fantasies. His persona symbolizes the forbidden leap for everybody.⁵²

Stone also notes that there is no anxiety in Busch's drag. He can do anything and not despise himself for it, and this acceptance of self (the female self) is what makes Busch's performance radical, "allowing him to venture bravely into his fantasies without minimizing their scariness."⁵³

Following Stone's line of thought and applying it to the play itself, Mimi Kramer of the New Yorker observed:

Psycho Beach Party uses cross-dressing to send up the mores and assumptions of heterosexual behavior . . . Most drag theatre is ultimately boring, because the truth it discovers--that women are 1) hateful, or 2) monsters, or 3) really men--is too simplistic to be anything but a falsity. But the underlying joke in Psycho Beach Party--that what made all the clean-cut-kid movies of the early sixties so clean-cut was latent homosexuality anyway--is true. That's why it's funny.⁵⁴

However, not all critics found Busch's subversive view of teenage sexuality of 1960s amusing.

A major component of this send-up was the subplot involving Yo Yo and Provoloney, which several critics found obtrusive and awkward.⁵⁵ Frank Rich of the Times thought the tone was uncertain and saw no humor at all in Yo Yo's gay liberation speech:

The hilarious comic tension between the squeaky-straight surface of the beach party movies and the suppressed sexuality lurking underneath evaporates once the subtext is stated point-blank. Charles Ludlam, a true deadpan artist, never made his characters spell out authorial themes, and that's why his inversions of old movie genres, like last season's Artificial Jungle, got the subversive laughs that elude Mr. Busch.⁵⁶

In fact, the Yo Yo/Provoloney sequences simply did not work. The gay liberation speech was intended as parody, but many audience members, like Rich, seem to have taken the text as a piece of propaganda. The problem was that Busch did not take the Yo Yo/Provoloney subplot far enough. The dialogue was not as outrageous as the rest of the show. Here is Yo Yo's gay liberation speech after his announcement that he and Provoloney are lovers:

Provoloney. I've read all about the persecution of homosexuals, how in big cities, bars are raided and innocent people arrested, their lives ruined. But someday, someday we're going to fight back and laws will be changed and our brothers and sisters will march down the main streets of America shouting that we are proud to be who we are.⁵⁷

In the videotapes, when Bobby Carey turns out to the audience to deliver the lines cited above, his earnest and stiff delivery gives the audience the impression that he wants to be taken seriously. Missing is the slight distancing between actor and text that is necessary in order for the audience to feel comfortable enough to laugh. The moment is not camp, nor does it elicit humor because the incongruous relationship of actor/material/context is not excessive enough.

The Yo Yo/Provoloney subplot was originally conceived because Busch had promised Carey a substantial part after Pardon My Inquisition, during which Carey had to submit to rear nudity and mimed fellatio. Elliott remembers that Halliday wanted to play a young character that wasn't as "creepy" as his other Limbo roles.⁵⁸ Busch came up with the idea of Halliday and Carey as two surfers who

turn out to be gay but the idea never really meshed with the style of the rest of the play. With his eccentric looks and high-strung manner, Halliday seemed miscast. For the Off-Broadway production, lines were changed in an effort to make his character more zany, but the interaction between Halliday and Carey never resulted in the comic dementia the rest of the play was generating. Elliott was in a quandary:

Either you cut the whole thing, in which case you're dealing with a couple of actors who won't have anything to do . . . Charles and I talked about it, we tried to come up with something that would work, but we couldn't . . . The play was so popular that we moved it, and when you move a play that is working so well you're hesitant to do major surgery . . . In order to re-write a whole subplot you're really changing a lot in a play, and I think we just left well enough alone.⁵⁹

When Psycho Beach Party opened, Elliott and Busch were still at a loss about how to make the Halliday/Carey scenes work.

Except for The Lady in Question and Times Square Angel, every Limbo play contains a gay character. But like the later Red Scare on Sunset (1991), Psycho Beach Party seems to have an overt political agenda about gay issues, even though the treatment is cursory.⁶⁰ Andrew Ross, in his analysis of camp (No Respect), states that "from the point of view of gay liberation, camp could only be a survivalist ethic, and never an oppositional critique."⁶¹ While it focuses on the Carey/Halliday subplot, Psycho Beach Party is an awkward mixture that never achieves a level of outrageousness in which camp or parody can thrive.

Even though Psycho Beach Party got mixed notices from several important daily papers (New York Post, Daily News, and Frank Rich of the Times), houses were initially good, especially while the cult audience was attending. But for several reasons, the Off-Broadway transfer was not a happy experience for the company.

One of the main culprits was the Players Theatre itself, which Julie Halston remembers as being hot and musty during the summer and cold and drafty in winter.⁶² There was no green room for the actors, and the cast found themselves confined in two claustrophobic dressing rooms.

Of greater significance were the growing pains that the company was beginning to experience. Theatre-in-Limbo had made the transition from a week-end game played in an East Village club to a professional company that was competing in the New York theatre and the strain was beginning to show. The company had now been continuously working together for three years, and nerves were frayed. Fights began to erupt, especially between the women: Robinson, London, and Marlowe.

Becky London remembers:

It would get ridiculous. It would be like don't turn upstage while I'm breathing . . . That is what acting companies do when they are stuck with each other for a long time. You are stuck with other people and everybody wants to be the funniest, everybody wants to get the most laughs, everybody wants to get the biggest hand, the best reviews, and the most people calling them. It was the actresses who did this basically.⁶³

The women had to share a dressing room, and London admits that "too many divas in a small room is what it was. We were all so goddamn unhappy."⁶⁴ London was the first to leave the cast, but her departure did not measurably reduce the strain. Marlowe was the next to turn in her notice, and by March, Robinson and Belanger had also quit.⁶⁵ They were replaced by Dea Lawrence (Mrs. Forrest), Charlotte Booker (Bettina Barnes), Rick E. Rodgers (Marvel Ann), and Charlotte Mayer (Berdine).⁶⁶

Another unfortunate situation developed with the departure of Kathie Carr as production stage manager. Carr was in the process of changing careers and decided

she no longer wanted to be the company's stage manager. While she continued to design and maintain wigs for the company, probably her most important contribution had been maintaining a disciplined performance during the course of a production's run. She accomplished this by constantly giving notes to actors when they strayed from Elliott's direction and Busch's text. Although the new stage manager, T.L. Boston, had far more experience than Carr and was a thorough professional, he was not as much of a disciplinarian. Elliott's appearances became infrequent when he took over the direction of Harry Kondoleon's Zero Positive at the New York Shakespeare Festival. As a result, Busch felt that he was now responsible for preserving the performance. According to Halliday, the notes Busch gave to his fellow actors also contributed to the tension in the company. Halliday sums up the situation:

The whole company is a family. During Psycho Beach Party it became too close. We were doing everything together. No one had their own life, the company was what they had.⁶⁷

Essentially, the company needed a rest from each other. And with the closing of Psycho Beach Party on 15 May 1988, they would get one. Five months would pass before they would get together again to mount The Lady in Question at the WPA.

On 16 April, one month before Psycho Beach Party ended its run, Jeff Veazey died of AIDS; he was thirty-three years old.⁶⁸ His re-staging of the Limbo number for the Players Theatre was his last professional work as choreographer. With Veazey's death another cycle came to an end; since Psycho Beach Party, no dance number has been incorporated into a Limbo play.

Psycho Beach Party was the second longest running Limbo production, logging sixteen previews and three hundred and forty-four performances. Variety had predicted that the play would have "its primary appeal among the gay community but is funny enough for a wider response," and, indeed, considering the mixed notices the production received, a ten month run was quite respectable.⁶⁹ The Advocate, however, noted that while the subject matter of Psycho Beach Party was "only marginally gay . . . Busch's sensibility is profoundly so."⁷⁰ Several months into the run, two young critics for a college newspaper were describing the audience and play as a mis-match:

Psycho Beach Party is like a big inside joke playing before an audience that doesn't really get it. A more appreciative group of theatregoers would be able to feed off of all the Busch innuendo that is flung from the stage in great handfuls, and while they did seem somewhat more enthusiastic towards the end, I could hear a lot of people muttering "weird" as they exited the theatre.⁷¹

Even though Busch's warmth as a performer was making drag accessible to a wider public, the language of camp seemed ultimately to inhibit the company's ability to reach out to a commercial New York audience.

The closing of Psycho Beach Party marked the end of the company's longest continuous period of working together. Success brought the prospect of other career options: Elliott involved himself in Up Against It, a musical featuring a Joe Orton libretto at the New York Shakespeare Festival; Busch wrote a television pilot and adapted the libretto of a 1950s musical, Ankles Aweigh!, to be done at the Goodspeed Opera; Andy Halliday wrote and starred in a play of his own. The company seemed to be drifting apart. There had been talk of a new production, Kiki, the Rage of Gay

Paree, but with the Limbo Lounge closed, there was no space to showcase a new work.

With Psycho Beach Party, Theatre-in-Limbo entered a new phase. Success meant that they were judged by different standards. Critics had noted the company's development: the growing confidence, the developing sophistication. But to borrow a line from the play, they were playing hard ball now. Although the effort of competing in the professional arena strained individual relationships, the company did not disband. The actors remained loyal to Busch and Elliott, partly out of affection and respect, and in some cases, because Limbo offered acting opportunities that could not be found elsewhere. Soon they would reunite for The Lady in Question and garner the most critical acclaim they had yet received. Theatre-in-Limbo's story was far from over.

NOTES

1. Charles Busch, Gidget Goes Psychotic, Limbo Lounge, 17 October 1986 (?), Videocassette, property of author, New York City.
2. The Limbo Lounge closed and re-opened under the name of the Asylum. Michael Limbo, and Jeannette and Victor Anonymous were no longer associated with the club.
3. The Theatre-in-Limbo mailing list was an important element in the company's success. The people on this list were not passive or disinterested parties, but had taken the trouble to get to 9th Street and Avenue B, sometimes waiting on the sidewalk for a half hour or more. If, after the show, they made the additional effort to sign the list, they probably could be counted on to be interested in future projects. Indeed, many of them proved loyal: they followed shows that moved Off-Broadway and returned to the Limbo Lounge for other company productions.
4. Although Busch's character appears in drag for the entire play, "she" reveals herself to actually be a man. Busch allows himself to be perceived exactly as he is; a man in a dress. He has never attempted to try this device again in a Limbo play, although, in 1992, he wrote a play about a drag queen called Miss Divina. The play was not intended for the company.
5. Richard Hornby, Drama, Metadrama, and Perception, (Lewisburg, Pennsylvania: Bucknell University Press, 1986), 32. In the case of Gidget, this strategy of alienation used references to another medium (film), performer (star acting like Tallulah Bankhead), and gender (through drag performance). Hornby notes that such real-life references were probably more important in performance than in playtext (Hornby, 100). Therefore, the evidence favored in this discussion is videotape.
6. Gidget Goes Psychotic was videotaped during the second week-end of the run (18 October 1986?). The two tapes of Psycho Beach Party were recorded during previews in July of 1987 (n.d.), and the following 15 January 1988.
7. Michael Leithead had been helping out with Limbo productions. He had previously acted a small role in Pardon My Inquisition. This and the following summer's Psycho Beach Party were his final appearances with Theatre-in-Limbo. Lanette Hohl was the company manager for a short time after David Lawlor and Thom Shovestall left (see Chapter Four). This was her only appearance with Theatre-in-Limbo. She went on to another job before Psycho Beach Party opened and was replaced by Judith Hansen, who later understudied in The Lady in Question and played Marta Towers in Red Scare on Sunset.

8. Charles Busch, "Gidget Goes Psychotic," (1986) TMs [photocopy], p. 1-2, property of author, New York City.
9. Ibid., p. 1-4.
10. Busch, "Gidget Goes Psychotic, 1986," p. 1-6. Audience response in brackets was consistent in three previously cited videotapes.
11. Charles Busch, Times Square Angel, (New York: Samuel French, 1985), p. 14.
12. Mark Franko, "Where He Danced: Cocteau's Barquette and Ohno's Water Lilies," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 107, no. 3, (May 1992): 602. Franko's article is an interesting analysis of the art of Kazuo Ohno, a Japanese practitioner of the dance form Butoh. Franko notes that a feature of Ohno's performance is maintaining disillusion. Like the Butoh artist, drag performance also contains signs that reveal the true sexuality of the performer. Busch, for instance, does not wear falsies and he delivers his lines in the natural male register of his voice. Yet costume, gesture, and inflection create a strong urge on the part of the spectator to accept the illusion, if only sporadically.
13. Robert Feldberg, "Psycho Beach Party: Gidget Goes to High Camp," The Record, 21 July 1987.
14. Mommie Dearest (1981) was a film about Joan Crawford's relationship with her children, starring Faye Dunaway. Based on the best-selling book by Christina Crawford, it chronicles the supposed ill-treatment Crawford gave her children. The movie featured a monstrous and theatrically oversized Dunaway as Crawford and became an instant camp classic.
15. Busch, "Gidget Goes Psychotic," p. 2-2,3.
16. Ibid., p. 4-6.
17. Ibid., p. 6-2.
18. Ibid., p. 6-5.
19. Ibid., p. 6-6.
20. Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale, Popular Film and Television Comedy, (London: Routledge, 1990), 32. The authors define a comic moment as "a form characterized . . . by the extent to which it can exist only within a narrative context--as a consequence of the existence of characters and a plot." Neale and Krutnik differentiate the comic moment from the gag, an non-linguistic comic action (51), and the joke or wisecrack, an intentionally funny comment, line, anecdote, or story (47).

21. Jeff Veazey had recently been hospitalized with pneumocystis pneumonia, an AIDS-related illness, which is probably why Pardon My Inquisition had no dance number, but had recovered by the time Gidget was in rehearsal.
22. Busch lifted and conflated Gidget's story from Hitchcock's Marnie (1964) and Spellbound (1945), while the text is a parody of Catherine's confession under hypnosis in Tennessee Williams's Suddenly, Last Summer, even borrowing the name of the town where the traumatic event took place, Cabeza de Lobo. Tennessee Williams, Suddenly, Last Summer, vol. 3, The Theatre of Tennessee Williams (New York: New Directions, 1971).
23. See Barry D. Adam, "A Social History of Gay Politics," in The Sociology of Male Homosexuality (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), and Dennis Altman, The Homosexualization of America (New York: St. Martins Press, 1982). Adam cites the "Stonewall Rebellion," 28 June 1969, as the incident that triggered gay liberation in New York, which then spread to other major cities in the United States. Stinky's speech is intended to be humorously anachronistic because Gidget takes place in 1962.
24. Brian Whitehill, interview by author, 3 October 1992, tape recording, New York City.
25. Busch, "Gidget Goes Psychotic," p. 4-2.
26. Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 154. Dyer notes that the gay sensibility brings together the antithetical qualities of intensity and irony, extreme feeling and a disparaging sense of its absurdity. In this sense, Gidget contained the most skillful use of camp Busch and his collaborators had yet devised.
27. Vivien Leone, interview by author, 22 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
28. Charles Busch, interview by author, 17 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
29. Becky London, interview by author, 5 February 1992, tape recording, New York City.
30. Arnie Kolodner, interview by author, 2 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
31. Charles Busch, interview by author, 17 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
32. Variety, 9 December 1987.
33. Munvies's letter, as well as other correspondence relating to this case, are in the private files of Kenneth Elliott and have been examined for this study.

34. Peter Sanders, press agent, Shirley Herz Associates, Memorandum to Enid Nemy, TD [photocopy], 8 June 1987, property of author, New York City; Kevin G. Salwen, "Sally Field May Be a Star Now, But Will This Play Lure Her Back?" The Wall Street Journal 12 June 1987. Sanders mentions to Nemy that the five runner-up titles were Life's A Beach (Amy Ronis), Psycho Psurf Girl (David Engel and Eric Underwood), Pygtalion (Patrick Lewis), Freak-Out at Malibu Beach (Lee Raines), and Beach Blanket Breakdown (Sebastian Stuart).

35. Charles Busch, "Psycho Beach Party," (1987) TMs [stage manager's promptbook], property of T.L. Boston, New York City.

36. All the Limbo shows featured orchestral music that ironically underscored dialogue sequences or played during scene changes. The music was usually taken from a film score, which, depending upon genre and time period, could be a "classical" Hollywood score by Erich Korngold, Max Steiner, Miklos Rozsa (Theodora and Pardon), or the more contemporary sounds of Frank Perkins (Palm Springs Weekend) which had been used in Coma and Gidget Goes Psychotic. Ken Elliott, as he had done in the past, chose the incidental music, which he usually assembled from various soundtracks in Andy Halliday's extensive record collection.

37. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 9 September 1991, tape recording, New York City. Kochan had first worked with Elliott when "Maniac" had to be re-recorded six-eight months into the run of Vampires because of unavailability of rights. Kochan re-orchestrated "Maniac" as he would do with the "Limbo Rock" in Psycho Beach Party, which used the same tune found in the original Chubby Checker hit song.

38. Busch, interview, 17 October 1991.

39. Locke had designed a white dress for Busch to wear for an annual drag ball, "Night of a Thousand Gowns," without asking for a fee. When it was decided that Glaser would design Psycho Beach Party, Elliott advised Busch to pay Locke \$500 for the dress, so that Locke couldn't say he had done Busch a favor. Elliott had grown more savvy since the Barry Odom episode. This dress, incidently, was one of the inspirations for The Lady in Question; Busch often states, only half facetiously, that he wrote a play so that he could wear it again.

40. Busch, interview, 17 October 1991.

41. William Raidy, "On MacDougal Street, Charles Busch is King," Sunday Republican, 8 November 1987.

42. Whitehill, interview, 3 October 1991.

43. Ibid.

44. David J. Gersten, review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, Backstage, 14 August 1987.

45. Mimi Kramer, review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, New Yorker 10 August 1987, p. 60.
46. Stephen Holden, review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, New York Times, 21 July 1987.
47. Ibid.
48. Clive Barnes, "Beach Party Washout," New York Post, 21 July 1987.
49. Review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, Manhattan Spotlight, November 1987.
50. Howard Kissel, "Leftovers Again?" Daily News, 21 July 1987; David Lida, review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, Women's Wear Daily, 21 July 1987; Morna Murphy-Martell, review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, Hollywood Reporter, 14 August 1987.
51. Charles Busch, interview, 7 November 1991.
52. Laurie Stone, "Sand Blast," Village Voice, 28 July 1987.
53. Ibid.
54. Mimi Kramer, review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, New Yorker, 10 August 1987, p. 60.
55. David Batan, "Summer's Gone but this Beach Party Goes On," Washington Square News, 12 October 1987; Feldberg, Record, 21 July 1987. Batan finds that Yo Yo's speech "seems strangely out of place, and virtually bogs down the climax," while Feldberg feels the Yo Yo/Provoloney relationship "doesn't mesh into the outrageous mood of the evening . . . It's presented self-consciously and without much humor."
56. Frank Rich, "Critic's Notebook," New York Times, 20 August 1987.
57. Busch, "Psycho Beach Party," stage manager's promptbook, p. 9-85.
58. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 9 September 1991, tape recording, New York City.
59. Ibid.
60. For the 1991 Theatre for The New City production of Times Square Angel, Busch added the characters of two gay angels, who had two scenes with Albert in heaven. They had little effect on the main body of the play.
61. Andrew Ross, No Respect (New York: Routledge, 1989), 162-3.

62. Julie Halston, interview by author, 27 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.
63. Becky London, interview by author, 5 February 1992, tape recording, New York City.
64. Ibid.
65. Busch believes Aceves left because of the pressure in working with Robinson. Aceves flatly denies this and states she just needed a rest from the company. Busch also feels Robinson fabricated a job to justify her own departure, but London recalls a complication: either the job was legitimate and fell through or Robinson was too ill at the time to work.
66. These actors did not really become part of the Limbo company, in the sense that Busch wrote roles for them.
67. Andy Halliday, interview by author, 11 July 1991, tape recording, New York City.
68. "Obituary," Variety, 27 April 1988.
69. Humm, review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, Variety, 5 August 1987.
70. Barry Walters, "Gidget Goes Psychotic," review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, Advocate, 29 September 1987.
71. Nora Rotter and Jay Wood, "A Weird Party," review of Psycho Beach Party by Charles Busch, Medium (Livingstone College, Rutgers University) 14 October 1987.

CHAPTER SIX

THE LADY IN QUESTION: LIMBO'S APOTHEOSIS

During the spring of 1988, while Psycho Beach Party was still running, Albert Poland, an Off-Broadway general manager, told his friend, Kyle Renick, "you must meet this producer that has kept the running costs of his show, Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, down to \$12,000-14,000 a week."¹ Renick, who was artistic director of the WPA Theatre, expressed interest, and on 3 April 1988, Poland arranged a dinner between Renick, Busch, Elliott, and himself. During the evening, Busch pitched the idea of a Nazi/World War Two melodrama to Renick. Before they parted company, Renick had committed to a production without seeing a word of the play, which, of course, had not yet been written.

In addition to his regular forthcoming 1988-89 season, Renick wanted to produce a group of late night entertainments parodying American popular culture. He envisioned a cycle of plays that would recapture the wild abandon of Off-Off Broadway in the early 1970s:

All this energy and chaos and craziness and lunacy that I associate with the early days of Off-off Broadway essentially went away. Even the Ridiculous Theatrical Company became respectable. Because I kept thinking about those early days with both nostalgia and fondness, but also a sense of loss, that part of our theatrical heritage had been passed by, it occurred to me that I would start a new series of plays that I would call the Silly Series, which would be self-explanatory, and the reason to do it would be to try to recover some of the lunacy of those early days.²

Theatre-in-Limbo seemed the perfect company to inaugurate the WPA's Silly Series, and Renick called Elliott and Busch in September to give them definite dates for their Nazi melodrama parody. After a week of rehearsals, the play, eventually called The Lady in Question, would run four weeks (18 November-11 December), playing Thursday through Sunday with a second late show on Saturday night, for a total of sixteen performances.

The popular story of how The Lady in Question evolved is succinctly summed up by Theatre-in-Limbo publicist Sam Rudy: "Kyle had this set and Charles had this dress, hence, the audience gets this play."³ The truth behind the first part of Rudy's statement is that Busch, indeed, had a dress which had been designed by Robert Locke, and which Busch had worn to the Night of A Thousand Gowns, a annual drag ball that he had recently attended. When Busch wears a dress he immediately thinks of a character and a situation; this gown suggested the 1940s to him; he pictured himself as a sophisticated American being interrogated by Nazis but triumphing.

However, the idea of a Nazi play did not emerge out of thin air. Busch first began improvising sketches about Nazi hunters with Ed Taussig during their years at Northwestern (see Chapter Two). Later, Elliott would often entertain Busch with improvisatory riffs in which he played an evil Nazi officer terrorizing war refugees. The 1940s was one of Busch's favorite periods in which to set a play (e.g. Times Square Angel). So, although the dress might have provided an immediate inspiration, the idea itself had been germinating in Busch's imagination for many years.

The second part of Rudy's statement is more misleading, although it too is based on fact. The play that closed at the WPA immediately before Lady went into

rehearsal was Larry Kramer's Just Say No, a satire on President Reagan and the First Lady.⁴ The Kramer play was part of the WPA's regular subscription season. Since there was little money left for the Silly Series, the plan was to do Lady on a bare stage, but before Busch had finished writing the script, he and Elliott visited the WPA and saw the set for Just Say No: the interior of a contemporary Washington, D.C. townhouse. In a spontaneous decision, Busch decided he could make the staircase, seven doors, fireplace mantel, and a painting which concealed a wall safe work for his play:

I said, save the whole thing. Don't take anything away. Then I had to figure out where all the seven doors led to in this new world I was imposing on this Washington townhouse.⁵

Brian Whitehill painted everything gray and the Lady in Question inherited a set. After four years, the Theatre-in-Limbo actors could finally sit down on a stage.

Most of the plot of Lady was taken from a Norma Shearer/Robert Taylor vehicle called Escape (1940), with dialogue, and situations culled from various Nazi melodramas including Idiot's Delight (1939), Reunion in France (1943), Above Suspicion (1943), Notorious (1946). The story takes place in 1940 and concerns Gertrude Garnet (Busch), a world famous concert pianist, who is traveling in Europe with her friend, Kitty (Halston). They arrive at a Bavarian town where Gertrude is to play a concert. Baron Von Elsner (Elliott), a vicious Nazi officer, invites them to stay at his schloss and promptly becomes infatuated with Gertrude. Meanwhile, another American, Professor Erik Maxwell (Kolodner), tries to enlist Gertrude's aid in rescuing his mother, the famous actress Raina Aldric (Robinson), who has escaped a concentration camp and is hiding in the catacombs below the schloss.

At first the apolitical, self-involved Gertrude refuses to help, even when her friend Kitty volunteers, but when Kitty is murdered by the Baron's teenage niece, Lotte (Halliday), she changes her mind. The Baron's evil mother, Baroness Augusta (Robinson again), unsuccessfully tries to poison Gertrude. In the ensuing melee, Lotte is killed by a repentant Nazi youth, Karel (Carey), who runs off with Heidi (Marlowe), another young insurgent. Gertrude shoots the Baron, which enables Raina to flee the schloss with Heidi's father, Professor Mittelhoffer (Hamilton). By the time Gertrude and Erik manage to escape, they have fallen deeply in love. Pursued by the Nazis, they ski down the mountain slopes to Switzerland and freedom, but Eric is shot. As the curtain descends he revives while Gertrude envisions a Europe that will one day be free of the Nazi horror.

Lady's plot is highly melodramatic but much less excessive than previous Limbo efforts. In fact, during rehearsals, the general opinion among company members was that the play was not funny. An early working title had been Fighting Girls Against the Blitzkrieg or, Kraut on the Side, Please! but was changed when Elliott felt a zany title would create the wrong audience expectation.⁶

To the company's surprise, The Lady in Question turned out to be very funny indeed, and the enthusiastic audience response was due, in large part, to three important factors: 1) the dialogue, which, despite Elliott and Busch's misgivings, was quite amusing, 2) the performers themselves, who often gave the lines a humorous twist simply by delivering them through their stage personas, and 3) the consistent references to one specific film genre (Nazi/World War Two melodramas), which

allowed the camp humor to be presented in an accessible form to a greater portion of the audience.

Lady's dialogue was sprinkled with verbal humor: comic events, intentional jokes, wisecracks, and running gags.⁷ Typical of the Limbo verbal joke is the vulgar wisecrack and the camp strategy of alternating pretentious declamation with vulgarism. An example occurs during Lotte's pursuit of Karel, just before he shoots her:

Karel. Don't come any closer.

Lotte. I'm the one you desire.

Karel. Lotte, what are you saying?

Lotte. Ravage me, impale me.

Karel. Get out of the way.

Lotte. Fuck me, Karel, fuck me.⁸

The culmination of the above exchange is not simply a bid for a laugh. Lotte's obscene explosion is motivated by her desperate love for Karel. What makes the moment funny on the page is that the line is supposed to be spoken by a twelve-year-old girl in blond pigtails. What makes the moment camp in performance is that the girl is played by a man. Generally, the verbal humor in Lady is far more grounded in situation and character than past Limbo plays, which, in turn, restrained the camp treatment of the material.

Busch used the German language itself, with its guttural sounds, to create humor by implying a vulgar, even obscene meaning to a German phrase. In a verbal dueling match reminiscent of exchanges between the two divas in Vampire Lesbians,

Gertrude and Baroness Augusta use German words as weapons. As the hostility escalates, they hurl the titles of musical compositions at each other with increasing speed and venom:

Augusta. Madame Garnet, forgive my ignorance of your remarkable career. As chairwoman of the Reich Committee for the Preservation of the Teutonic Arts, I have devoted myself to the work of exclusively German artists. Do you include any Strauss in your repertoire?

Gertrude. Indeed. His Bein Schlafengehen is a concert staple of mine.

Augusta. An American playing Bein Schlafengehen. No doubt you also perform his Burlesque in D.

Gertrude. [*Understands the bitchiness behind the remark*] I sure do. I'm also quite adept with Liszt, particularly his Weiner, Klager, Sorgan, Zagen.

Augusta. Really, of course, a true test would be Schumann's Warter, Warter, Wilder, Schiffsmann.

Gertrude. With my eyes closed. Honey, get me in the right mood, and I'll hit you with my Faschingsschwank aus Wein.

Augusta. I am sure you do quite a raucous Freulings Fahrt!

Gertrude. (*mad*) Oh yeah!⁹

Even when the script of Lady was being intentionally funny, it was hardly sophisticated humor.

What made the lines funny, complex, and comically rewarding was the actors' delivery.¹⁰ Busch skillfully exploited the actors' stage personas, or trips, which, continually commented on the characters they were playing and often gave Limbo productions a metatheatrical dimension. While Lady was still in scenario form, Busch planned to cast Andy Halliday as Baroness Augusta, but after seeing several 1940s Hollywood movies about Hitler youth, Elliott suggested that Halliday play the little

girl Lotte, which gave Meghan Robinson the opportunity to play Augusta, as well as her original role of Raina.

Robinson's grandiloquent manner was perfectly suited to the two mothers. Her Augusta was a formidable match for Busch. As Raina, she was the quintessential grand dame of the theatre as she demonstrated that even though confined to a wheelchair, she had not lost the strength to make the most of a dramatic situation nor the mental recall to sprinkle her conversation with quotes from her best notices. She also displayed a flair for physical comedy as she laboriously dragged herself up the staircase to hide from the Baron and Lotte while Gertrude distracted them. As captured in the videotaped performances, Robinson is seen painfully hoisting herself up each step by holding the railings. At one point, she loses her balance and falls all the way back down again. On finally reaching the second story landing, exhausted and unable to walk any further, Robinson pitches forward in a somersault which catapults her into Gertrude's room. Robinson continued to refine the "staircase bit," and by the time Lady played the Orpheum the following summer, it had become a highlight of the show.

Elliott's idea of using Andy Halliday as twelve-year-old Lotte was an inspired bit of casting. In writing the role, Busch took advantage of Halliday's high-strung nervousness and distinctive vocal mannerisms. As unsuited as he was for Provoloney in Psycho Beach Party, playing Lotte allowed Halliday to blossom as a performer. He contorted his mouth and narrowed his eyes, creating bizarrely arch facial takes. His mugging was even funnier because he never tried to suggest femininity in his characterization. As a result, his performance glowed with a comic perversity that

transcended gender. His body language seemed to be a comment on the precocious acting style of certain child performers such as Patty McCormack in the film The Bad Seed (1956). From his first entrance, he bubbled with self-satisfaction and glee. The element of drag actually caused Halliday's impersonation of a child monster to be enjoyable. By making her a physical travesty, Halliday allowed the audience to laugh at Lotte's actions, rather than respond with loathing. This role was, without doubt, his finest performance with Theatre-in-Limbo.

The rest of the company also showed more flair than they had in the past. Bobby Carey was given his most dramatic role to date. Although his performance was still tinged with a stiff, mechanical delivery, he was now far more confident on stage; his work could be enjoyed as a parody of a juvenile in a second rate stock company.

Theresa Marlowe also seemed to be giving a performance that was a parody of an incompetent young ingenue. In fact, Lady was probably her most extreme performance. Marlowe gave line readings that seemed painfully awkward and mechanical, as her head bobbed up and down and her eyes wandered in an unfocused gaze. At times, she hardly seemed to be listening and responding to the other actors at all. Here is a brief interchange between Heidi, her father, and Erik which, on the printed page, doesn't seem humorous at all:

Professor. We have devised a plan of escape.

Erik. Escape? Is it possible?

Heidi. Yes, but exceedingly dangerous.¹¹

Marlowe gets a big laugh on this line in all three tapes of The Lady in Question, because her delivery is sing-song, her eyes vacant, her whole demeanor unaffected by the other actors and the fear and anxiety of the dramatic situation. At other times, Marlowe dropped this enervated manner and unleashed an unexpected power, as if she were possessed. With almost no transition or development, this transformation was startling and hilarious. Marlowe's passion seemed sincere, yet totally out-of-character, given the behavior she had initially presented to the audience:

Heidi. [talking to Raina about the Nazis and their influence on Karel, Marlowe weeps piteously.] Madame Aldric, tell me, help me understand why he has turned against me. *[Marlowe builds in power]* Oh God, how I hate them. They've made this whole goddam world LOUSY! Well, something has changed in Heidi Mittelhoffer and I'm gonna make those bastards pay for what they've done. They've butchered my dreams!!!!¹²

Marlowe drew out "lousy" in a braying cadence that was emphatically contemporary in tone. When she came to the final line in her speech, she delivered it with a hoarse scream, yet her body remained curiously relaxed. The incongruity of the fierce vocal energy and the lax physical movement gave the moment a bizarrely humorous edge. Again, on the tapes, the audience responds vigorously to this sequence, and according to cast members, the line often got a hand. The moment itself caused pleasure on two levels: in a narrative context, the audience applauded the character for having the courage to take a political/moral stand, while on a metatheatrical level, they were surprised and delighted in Marlowe's ability to "come through" as an actress, revealing unsuspected power. Her incongruous intensity served to underscore the parodic content of her listless ingenue facade by showing it to be intentionally bogus.

Others in the cast also played on their particular eccentricities. Julie Halston, who had not acted with the company since she understudied Robinson in Vampires

and appeared in the Off-Broadway Times Square Angel, quit her job on Wall Street to try for a career in show business. She played Gertrude's sidekick, Kitty, with a comic blend of pretentious middle-class matron and brash vaudeville hoofer, a combination she would perfect in Red Scare on Sunset. Like Robinson, Halston was a fine supporting player for Busch; her energized delivery created an atmosphere in which his drag performance seemed restrained, even natural.

Arnie Kolodner gave his strongest performance yet as leading man Erik Maxwell. He rattled off lines with a machine gun delivery, as in the following speech:

*Erik. [on learning that his mother is to be executed in Prison] The monsters! I could kill every one of them with my bare hands. Why should they want her dead? She's an actress. She knows nothing about politics. [Kolodner speaks faster and faster] Dead! That word has nothing to do with my mother. My mother is life, life itself! Why? Why?*¹³

Like the example of Marlowe's dialogue given above, this speech on the printed page also seems without humor, but Kolodner's fervent yet run-on style of intonation insured a laugh on his final "Why?"

As in all the Limbo shows, the centerpiece of the production was Busch's characterization, but Lady offered him in a more cohesive performance than previous efforts; the work was disciplined and focused. Madeleine Astarte, Theodora, and Fauna, and the dual roles in Pardon My Inquisition were vaudeville turns, little more than an opportunity for Busch to go through a series of comic bits or posture in various camp melodramatic poses. While Irish O'Flanagan and Chicklet Forest showed a development away from simple camp entertainment, Busch's work in Times Square Angel was broad and cartoon-like, and Chicklet was literally two different

roles, at times harking back to Busch's one man show with its instant transformations. Certainly, "Ann Bowman" was more caricature than characterization. But with Gertrude Garnet, Busch at last had a solidly constructed role which he could play legitimately or parody, depending upon what he chose to do in a particular moment.

Part of the fun of Busch's performance was watching him slip in and out of character, commenting on a line or attitude and then pulling the audience back into the dramatic situation by the strength of his conviction and the power of the play's narrative force. His delivery consisted of a patchwork quilt of physical and vocal mannerisms suggested by various Hollywood film stars of the 1930s and 40s, such as Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, Barbara Stanwyck, and Mae West. But his work was not simple mimicry. By a move of the hand, a swivel of the shoulders, a nod of the head, Busch was parodying not just one star but a whole style of acting used during the period of the Hollywood studios. Foster Hirsch, in Acting Hollywood Style, calls this physically mannered playing the "mannequin" style of acting.¹⁴ Hirsch traces this technique back to the Delsartean acting tradition in which a series of gestures were codified to indicate specific emotions. This school of acting, whose modus operandi is style over content, creates an ideal arena in which camp can operate, for as Hirsch notes:

Whether inert or active, Delsartians play on the surface--strictly for show. And since they act in a style that is cleaner, more calculated and beautiful than real life could ever be, their work complements the many Hollywood scenarios in which reality has been reupholstered into a perfect-looking communal dream world, a realm in which emotional as well as physical truth has been more or less eliminated.¹⁵

The cult audience which followed Theatre-in-Limbo to the WPA was highly sensitive to the star acting being parodied and responded energetically. And even if audiences

did not recognize Busch's references to a particular star, they were likely to be aware of the tradition being spoofed.

Even the accent Busch used was a parody of what Hirsch calls "movie speech," in which all traces of regionalism have been erased by the careful ministering of studio dialect coaches.¹⁶ In movie speech, diction and inflection have been whitewashed in order to betray no hint of lower-class origins. The result is an artificially created dialect that existed on the Broadway stage and in the film world of the Hollywood studios. This is the way Busch speaks when Gertrude Garnet is trying to hide her proletarian roots. When he drops the dialect and the affectation, his tough "Noo Yawk" delivery comes through, as Gertrude reveals her origins as Barrelhouse Gertie, the Kissing Kitten on the Keys.

Gertrude Garnet was the classic camp role. Busch describes it:

Her ego is so big she is going to succeed. I think ultimately that is the joke of The Lady in Question. Finally . . . she lets down all her pretense and she is this cheap nasty dame who is striking out at all of them with this coarse American vulgarity that is sort of fabulous. Finally she abandons all her European trappings, even her European accent, and she is real American. When I was playing it one night I said this is what this play is about, it is a celebration of the American bitch who is so tough she will take on anything and succeed, indefatigable, indomitable.¹⁷

In Culture Clash, Michael Bronski notes the attraction gay men feel for the independent women in Hollywood films of the 30s and 40s. The assertive behavior found in these stars is exaggerated to create a camp persona--the proletarian heroine who is found in all of Busch's work with Limbo. Theodora was a carny dancer who worked her way up to being an empress; Irish O'Flanagan grew up in poverty and became a nightclub star; a poor virgin sacrifice became the vampire/celebrity Madeleine Andrews; and in Red Scare on Sunset, an Indiana Hoosier farm girl turned

herself into a movie star. With Gertrude Garnet, this process of self-creation that hides lower class roots, in which life itself is seen as theatrical performance, reached its clearest articulation.

But Busch's present performance was not only more focused in its camp sensibility, it was more controlled in its gender play, as well. The Lady in Question was the first Theatre-in-Limbo piece that featured a romantic relationship which demanded legitimate treatment. In the final scene, Gertrude's epiphany on the mountain slopes might seem simply silly or tedious unless the audience could, on some level, take the love story seriously. No Limbo play had yet attempted sincerely to portray a heterosexual romance at such a level of intensity. What made the situation particularly difficult, of course, was that both performers were male.

Busch's solution was to pull in and out of the scenes, commenting by a take or change in vocal tone. While an initial reading might see these moments as nothing more than attempts to get cheap laughs, they did, in fact, function as safety valves that released audience tension. After being allowed to laugh, the audience could then be drawn back into the story more easily. Here is an example from the love scene in the beginning of Act Two. Audience response remained consistent in the three tapes viewed and is noted in brackets:

Erik. You're so unbelievably beautiful at this moment [Kolodner says this with complete sincerity. The audience begins to titter uncomfortably.] The way the sunset catches your face and hair.

Gertrude. Oh, you mean like this? [While staying in the moment, Busch moves his head slightly, as if he were posing for a camera. The audience roars. He has diffused a potentially dangerous moment].

Erik. No, like this. [Kolodner gently touches Busch's face. The audience is now silent, watching. Busch and Kolodner play these next few lines legitimately, with

growing passion.] I know it's madness to feel this way after so short a time and with so much at stake, but I love you, Gertie.

Gertrude. Please, don't say it.

Erik. I love you. From the first moment I met you.

Gertrude. [*emotionally*] I believe you, and the strange thing is, I feel the same. For the first time, something has burst inside me and I feel what the poets call love. [*suddenly turns out to audience, with a look of comically exaggerated consternation.*] But do I trust it? [*Huge laugh from audience.*]¹⁸

Busch makes fun of the scene before the audience can. By parodying a convention-laden sequence of dialogue, he can function as a man in drag delivering romantic dialogue to another man without being rejected by the audience. Yet because the parody here is often so close to the source it refers to, the spectator can be held in the emotional grip of the narrative, and still derive enjoyment from the spoof. Later in the same scene, Kolodner gently kisses Busch on his upstage cheek and neck. The kiss is ambiguous, intimate without becoming sexually explicit. Busch and Kolodner both remember nights, when carried away with the emotion of the moment, they overstepped the bounds of this symbolic gesture, and displayed more overt sexual passion. The audience became ill at ease, coughed, and giggled.

A major factor that helped the actors achieve the fine line between serious intent and camp was the treatment of the source material used for parody. All the Limbo plays are parodies of cinematic or theatrical genres, which lends itself more easily to camp parody. But The Lady in Question is the only Limbo play which consistently stays within the confines of one particular genre, in this instance the Nazi/Spy melodramas Hollywood made during World War Two. This resulted in a play whose narrative force had the power to engage audiences on its own merits. As

Clive Barnes observed of the Orpheum production, "it . . . demands to be taken on the very same terms of that which it is satirizing."¹⁹

At this point, a definition of film genre is necessary to show how its characteristics are so compatible to Theatre-in-Limbo's agenda. According to Thomas Schatz in Hollywood Genres:

. . . a genre film--whether a Western or a musical, a screwball comedy or a gangster film--involves familiar, essentially one dimensional characters acting out a predictable story pattern within a familiar setting.²⁰

Genre films were extremely popular during heyday of the Hollywood studio system (approximately 1930-1960), the period most often used by Busch in his genre parodies. The genre film deals with a threat to the social order, but the way in which its characters respond, as well as the resolution of the plot, differs according to the particular genre. All genres, however, celebrate "the American way of life," a system of values which the film assumes to be accepted by its audience, as representative of the social community.

As he had done in Psycho Beach Party, Busch, by performing in drag, subversively debunked these values. In Lady, he exchanged lines with Kolodner that captured the Nazi melodrama's characteristic patriotism and propaganda:

Gertie. Hold my hand like any American boy would do with his girl. They won't win, will they, the Nazis?

Erik. We won't let 'em. God is on our side. Yeah, he's a regular Joe who won't let the bad guys get away with just a kick in the pants. You'll see, this time the krauts will be smashed to smithereens forever.²¹

In wig, make-up, and heels, Busch couldn't have been further from the image of the all-American girl Hollywood had in mind when it was making these genre films.

Schatz notes that in the genre film, character, setting, and plot have been conventionalized. This strategy stresses form over content, an approach corresponding to the "mannequin" acting style Busch and his fellow players refer to as they play.

In The Life of Forms in Art, Henry Focillon posits that as a form evolves and its conventions become well known, a growing awareness of its structures leads to parody and self-consciousness.²² The aging process and growing self-awareness that have permeated certain film genres gives camp the opportunity to thrive, for as Sontag states:

. . . the process of aging or deterioration provides the necessary detachment . . . Time liberates the work of art from moral relevance . . . Thus, things are campy, not when they become old--but when we become less involved in them.²³

Although forty-five to fifty years had passed since the height of the Nazi melodrama's popularity, there was still emotional and moral weight attached to the Nazis and World War Two, and Busch was very careful not to mention Jews or the word "concentration camp" in the script.

Because Lady adhered to one popular genre, special knowledge was not needed in order for its humor to be appreciated.²⁴ This fidelity to one specific genre affected Lady's designers, as well. Their contributions not only emphasized film reference in comic terms, but also gave the production a stronger stylistic continuity than other Limbo productions had possessed. The result of their work, begun at the WPA and developed at the Orpheum, represents, as Michael Sommers noted in Theatre Crafts, "the apotheosis of the Limbo look."²⁵

Whitehill chose gray to give the inherited set a feeling of coldness and isolation. He added a roll drop for the catacomb scene masking the full stage set, and for the scene at train station, which opens the play, he created his signature graphic design: a large screen, which represented a blown-up travel brochure. It depicted a lively, blonde girl skiing with the heading, "Tour Carefree Bavaria."

But it was the final skiing sequence which showed Whitehill and Leone at their wittiest and most inventive. Whitehill cut out long slots in the travel brochure screen and inserted small cut-out puppets to represent Gertrude and Erik on skis. The scene began with lights picking out the puppets as they "skied" down the slots; the effect was that of a movie "crane shot" tracking two actors from a distance. Then lights came up downstage left, revealing Busch and Kolodner standing stationary on a small ramp. They held ski poles and swayed slightly from side to side, giving the impression of motion, while "snowflakes" fell on them from the flies. Leone rented an American Scene machine, for which Whitehill had created a continuous tape loop. The tape functioned like a gobbo that threw a particular pattern of light and shadow on the stage. As the tape loop ran its course, it seemed as if trees raced by while Busch and Kolodner skied down the mountain slope. When Erik was shot, they both stumbled off the ramp and played the rest of the scene on the floor.

Robert Locke, who had originally done the costumes for Gidget Goes Psychotic, was asked to design Lady. He brought along Jennifer Arnold, wardrobe mistress for Psycho Beach Party, as co-designer. Locke and Arnold divided their work load; she took responsibility for most of the men's costumes, while he concentrated on the women. Locke and Arnold designed the clothes to evoke the

play's period, rather than create a surreal atmosphere of extravagance, as Glaser had often done.

As the designers tried to make choices that visually commented on film, the sound design also drew from cinematic devices. Taped voice-overs were used to give exposition and set a scene. James Cahill, who had recorded the voice of God for Times Square Angel, played an omniscient narrator and radio newscaster. Elliott, who always chose the music for Limbo productions, used various excerpts from film scores written for classic Hollywood movies such as Max Steiner's All This, And Heaven Too (1940). While every Limbo show had used music to underscore dialogue, they were often used for comic effect, as in Vampire Lesbians, Pardon My Inquisition, or Theodora. In these productions, the music would point up the theatrical pretensions of the piece. Lady was the first show in which the musical style was actually appropriate for the material. Lady's incidental music, cribbed from 1940s movies, seemed right at home in a parody of those very movies.

As can be seen from the above discussion, Lady had a stylistic coherence that earlier Limbo shows did not possess. Ironically, while Kyle Renick wanted the Silly Series to celebrate the anarchic theatricality of Off-Broadway in the 60s and 70s, Theatre-in-Limbo presented him with the most controlled, even conservative, production they had yet mounted. But that very conservatism made Lady appealing, not only with the cult audience, who had also responded positively to such fringe entertainments as Pardon My Inquisition and Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium, but with the regular subscription audience at the WPA. Renick remembers that about half way through the run, "people started telling us that it was commercial, that it was his

best work, that it had a future."²⁶ With such enthusiastic feedback, Renick and Elliott decided to co-produce a commercial Off-Broadway transfer, and they began to search for \$250,000 needed for the move.

Raising the capitalization was not easy. Busch requested that no critics be allowed to attend Lady.²⁷ Not only were there no reviews to show prospective backers, but at the time, Elliott and Renick did not have an impressive track record as producers. As a result, over six months passed before capitalization was reached.²⁸

After four years together, and as the company's median age began to reach the mid-thirties, members began to feel the need to assert their individuality and looked for opportunities beyond Theatre-in-Limbo. Elliott began to search for his own apartment, and soon moved out of the rooms he had shared with Busch for almost ten years. Although this did not affect the close working relationship he and Busch had developed over the years, Elliott continued to work on Up Against It at the New York Shakespeare Public Theatre and looked for other directing opportunities, as well. He had never viewed his career as exclusively bound to Theatre-in-Limbo, and now that he was getting noticed by the theatrical community, he wanted to take advantage of it and branch out.

Just before rehearsals commenced for the Off-Broadway production of Lady, Meghan Robinson paid a visit to Busch and Elliott and told them she had AIDS. Since Vampire Lesbians, she had kept her condition secret. When she was hospitalized during the summer of 1988, she denied that she was suffering from pneumocystis pneumonia, an opportunistic infection associated with AIDS. But now that her health was becoming more precarious, she wanted Busch and Elliott to know

of her condition before they offered her a job in an open-ended commercial production. However, she was still afraid of gossip and prejudicial treatment and made them promise not to tell the rest of the company. Busch and Elliott immediately urged her to accept the Off-Broadway run, and kept their word; they told no one of Robinson's condition until it became obvious during the final months of her life.

As for the rest of the company, the truth was never openly acknowledged during Lady's run; if they suspected, they seem to have intuitively deferred to her wishes. Bobby Carey, who had known for several years that he was also HIV positive, and had been quite ill prior to the WPA run, was actually the first company member to discover Robinson's HIV status when he visited her in the hospital and noticed drugs associated with AIDS. Like Busch and Elliott, Carey did not tell others until he felt Robinson's physical degeneration and emotional mood swings made it necessary.

Lady went through relatively minor adjustments for its Off-Broadway production. Although sixteen minutes were added to the one hundred and four minute playing time, there were no structural changes and revisions mainly involved additions to already existing scenes.²⁹ One new verbal dueling scene for Gertrude and Augusta was added in Act One, and the opening love scene in Act Two for Erik and Gertrude was expanded. Political satire, never Busch's strong point, did not figure heavily in Lady, but a scene with the Doctor and the Baron involving a travesty of the pledge of allegiance was cut during the Orpheum run after Elliott left the show, and does not appear in the Samuel French acting edition.

With an actual budget for sets and lights, the designers were able to elaborate on ideas at the Orpheum they could not execute at the WPA. The set remained the same, although Whitehill added a series of snow capped mountains rising above the ski lodge. The traditional false proscenium was made to resemble carved dark wood with ski poles and skis stuck on it. Little shelves on each side of the proscenium held beer steins. Carved on the steins were scenes from the play, along with the names Charles Busch and Anheuser Busch, the beer company. The theatre lobby was filled with authentic magazine advertisements from the period, featuring Busch as Gertrude Garnet superimposed on the model endorsing a variety of products. Whitehill observed:

I wanted to point out that Gertrude Garnet was an internationally acclaimed pianist. We did ads from the 40s, promoting Gertrude Garnet, and it also showed that she would promote anything. It showed her avaricious character, that she would do anything for a buck. You get the idea she is a famous person, and it also set up that we were in the 1940s.³⁰

The Orpheum lobby was Whitehill's most ingenious attempt at lobby decoration as an extension of set design and a means of preparing the audience for the play they were about to see.

Vivien Leone was no longer tied to the light plot for Just Say No and tried to give the production a film noir effect, with single shadows and sources of light. In keeping with the strong atmosphere of film reference, Lady was the only Limbo show that did not use strip lighting to give the effect of footlights. But Leone's boldest evocation of cinematic devices was to flash a gobbo on the travel brochure screen in the last moments of the show which spelled out "The End." Christmas tree lights

representing stars lit up as the music swelled and Gertrude gave her final triumphant lines:

Gertrude. Look Erik, the brightest star, it's directly over our heads. We must have crossed the border. We're free, darling, we're free . . . [And soon that bright star] will shine above all of Europe and the whole world will glow in its radiance, brighter, and stronger than we've ever, ever known. *[At this point the music swelled, the "stars" light up and below them, "The End" was projected on the mountain backdrop as the ultimate movie reference].*³¹

Whitehill designed the gobbo for Leone with the same graphic lettering as he used in the poster and flyers, but rather than tell Elliott she was going to use it, she surprised him during technical rehearsal:

I was embarrassed. I thought I had gone too far, but I couldn't resist. I had the template especially made. It cost me sixty dollars, and I didn't turn in the bill because I thought if it doesn't work I'll just swallow the sixty bucks, but everybody loved it. The look of that for me was so cinematically influenced that I thought let's just try it.³²

Combined with Whitehill's puppet skiers, the Max Steiner soundtrack, and Busch and Kolodner's conviction as performers, the final sequence was awash in film reference that combined the parody with a sincere homage to the genre.

After a two week rehearsal, The Lady in Question opened on 25 July 1989 to the most critical praise a Limbo show had yet received. Many reviewers noted that Lady showed a marked development in Busch as playwright and performer, praising it as "well-crafted, involving play," and "a first class farce, not just a vehicle for his dead-on, cross dressing comedy."³³ Michael Kuchwara, critic for Associated Press, stated:

[It] is his best work yet . . . Busch seems more assured and less campy in his creation of this real Hollywood heroine. The writing is also first-rate. There is a consistency of style and tone, a never wavering affection for the material.³⁴

Although several critics mourned the lack of anarchic comic excess that characterized earlier productions like Psycho Beach Party and found the play's comic spirit dampened by its faithfulness to the dramatic structure it parodied, others, like David Patrick Stearns of USA Today, noted:

Unlike some of the basement production values of Busch's Vampire Lesbians of Sodom and Psycho Beach Party, this production oozes legitimacy . . . Busch's writing has never been so solid, with humor arising more from the characters than from gags, and the characters have interesting layers . . . ³⁵

Many critics also noted that Busch had written significantly more substantial roles for his fellow players.

Probably the most astute notice, and one Busch himself often cites, came from Michael Feingold of the Voice, who had first suggested the company's name to Busch and Elliott:

The simulacrum of femaleness he [Busch] presents has a core of reality, but it's not the physical reality of a woman, it's the conceptual reality of female stage behavior as viewed on Broadway in the era between Mrs. Fiske and the advent of the sound film. Busch isn't imitating women, he's being actressy . . . the net effect of a Busch performance . . . is of going to see one's favorite female stage star, circa 1928, in a particularly silly and exaggerated vehicle . . . part of Busch's wit lies in his revealing the squaresville, well-made-play assumptions, accompanied by retrograde moral notions, that underlie the Hollywood epics of the '40s and '50s, and hence everything that follows in popular culture.³⁶

Feingold went on to compare Busch's work with Ludlam's:

Where the late Charles Ludlam conflated the classic with the trashy, using the collision to spark questions about morality, art, and everything else, Busch does a sleek, star-vehicle version of Ludlam's analytic camp. Like a comedic Schliemann excavating a junk-sculpture Troy, he pools the gloss off today's kitsch, revealing the rotten remnants of previous eras of kitsch layered underneath. The piquant, bittersweet joke of the event is the notion that trash springs eternal, that what made pit audiences gasp at an 1880s drame du Boulevard and flappers whimper in 1920s Broadway mezzanines can still raise dramatic gooseflesh today, albeit now mixed with knowing laughter.³⁷

Feingold ended his review with a rueful observation that the current play was a good natured burlesque but that before Limbo, Busch wrote and performed in solo work that had genuine substance, as well as wit. Although other critics were complaining that Busch was light-weight in comparison to Ludlam, very few, other than Feingold, had seen Busch's work as a solo performer and knew that he was capable of writing and performing a more sophisticated type of material than the Limbo parodies.

Not all the reviews were positive, however; some, like Rex Reed's, found the play to be like an extended sketch from the Carol Burnett Show, a popular television variety series which sometimes did parodies of famous movies and movie genres.³⁸ Most notices mentioned the cast favorably, singling out Andy Halliday and Meghan Robinson. Elliott was praised for restrained direction that kept the play grounded in a reality. And even if a few critics found the play "tired burlesque," or the supporting players unsatisfying, they praised Busch as a performer, noting his "remarkable comic range within the enclosed world of Hollywood movie star homage."³⁹

To the company's immense joy, the greatest acclaim came from the most influential source: the New York Times. Frank Rich, who had been unenthusiastic about Psycho Beach Party, wrote what amounted to a valentine to The Lady in Question:

While Mr. Busch's plays are often linked with Charles Ludlam's lighter efforts, such generalizing distorts the artistry of both. Mr. Ludlam, a theatrical classicist and political iconoclast, usually had a second agenda, ideological or esthetic, percolating within his gender-flipped sendups. Mr. Busch's attitude is the simpler one of "Hooray for Hollywood!" The man revels in trash. The Lady in Question mimics its source material so accurately and affectionately that it is as much homage as parody; the tone is closer to Dames at Sea or a Mel Brooks film than it is to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company . . . Mr. Busch is a walking anthology of feminine Hollywood legends. Yet the performance is not another cabaret drag act in which the

breathless quick changes are the oppressively showy point. His Gertrude is a seamless, often subtle characterization . . . without raising his voice, he is never upstaged by this riotous crew. Like the actresses he emulates, he rules by force of personality, often proving the cool, elegant, just slightly off-center eye of the farcical storm around him. That the lady in question is a man soon becomes beside the point. What matters here is that the performer is a star.⁴⁰

Kyle Renick read Rich's review aloud at the opening night party, in a scene reminiscent of the green room at the Provincetown Playhouse, when the New York Times review of Vampire Lesbians changed the fortunes of everybody concerned. The Lady company now responded with similar emotions. Certain that Rich's review, like Bruckner's, would insure a long and prosperous run, they raised shouts of jubilation. All too soon, however, their optimism would be proven wrong, and the curiously premature closing of Lady raised perplexing questions about several issues: the actual power of the Times critics and whether Theatre-in-Limbo had indeed produced a cross-over production that addressed a mainstream audience. But before these matters are examined, the backstage story of Lady's four month run must be recounted, in which real-life events rivaled the melodramatic machinations onstage.

On 28 July, Meghan Robinson walked into the lobby of the Orpheum, and on meeting Kenneth Elliott, announced that she had a temperature of 104 degrees. In fact, she was probably suffering another onslaught of pneumocystis pneumonia. The understudy (Judith Hansen) had just been hired and was still not ready to go on, so Elliott told Robinson he was going to cancel the show. But some important people were going to be in the audience that evening, and she insisted on going on. Robinson managed to get through the entire performance without cutting any dialogue or the physically taxing staircase sequence. Julie Halston remembers:

That night she went on with that temperature, her lungs were collapsing, and she was constantly trying to catch her breath backstage. Onstage she was weakened, but she still had that booming voice; offstage she was falling apart. It was amazing, a literal transformation . . . Backstage she got on the phone with her doctor's answering service . . . she was panicking . . . I literally watched this scene, and I started crying because I realized she had AIDS. After the performance was over and they whisked her away, I went upstairs to the boys' dressing room to Bobby [Carey] and I started crying. I said, Bobby, I know.⁴¹

On 10 August, less than two weeks later, Robinson was back in the show. She may have had a reputation as a difficult personality, but Robinson's decision to go on that evening in Lady shows a woman of enormous strength and courage.

As the run continued, it became clear to everyone in the company that Robinson was seriously ill. Mark Hamilton, for example, found out about Robinson's actual condition by accidentally overhearing a conversation between Halston and Robinson after her stay in the hospital. Hamilton recalls:

It happened very slowly but everyone began to get the general impression of what was going on, and it began to be reinforced in ways, with small emotional outbursts from cast members as they became aware. It was not commented on. Nothing was out in the open but all of us had begun to know . . . But because Meghan didn't want any official recognition or rumors going around, no one talked about it.⁴²

Robinson continued to miss performances as her health declined. Symptoms worsened: her hair began to fall out, she would become distracted and lose concentration, fall silent during intermission, and she astonished the cast by giving up smoking. Amazingly, several cast members still had no idea how ill she was. While the company's respect for Robinson's wishes was laudable, there was also, no doubt, a good deal of denial floating around backstage.

Robinson's illness was not the only black cloud that hovered over the cast during Lady's run. Tension between various company members escalated to new

heights. Andy Halliday began to act openly hostile to Busch. Their long standing relationship was complex, and increasingly aggravated by jealousy and competitiveness. Finally, Busch resorted to spending most of his time in the women's dressing room, which unfortunately was not much more pleasant.

The tension between Robinson and Theresa Marlowe, which developed during Psycho Beach Party, now grew acute. Robinson perceived Marlowe's behavior onstage and off as inconsistent and unprofessional. Whether this was true or not, there was no question that the disputes were initiated by Robinson. Julie Halston, who shared a dressing room with them, found herself in the position of peacemaker:

I was always saying, ladies, let's calm down, the second act is still on. By the time Lady came around, Meghan was so sick, she was also on AZT, and that makes you even more irritable. I yelled at Meghan, and Meghan said to me, "Julie, I don't have time for people like that. Don't you understand? I don't have time." How could I reply to that? I was in a terrible position. She did treat Theresa terribly, but on the other hand, Meghan was so ill, she was dying. It was just tough all around.⁴³

To make matters worse, the performances began to suffer due to several ill-fated events.

Bob Vandergriff, the stage manager, died suddenly of a heart attack on the morning of 25 October. T.L. Boston, who had been talking with Vandergriff about replacing him, was immediately called in. Elliott later noted, "different stage managers have different strengths."⁴⁴ Vandergriff had been an actor's stage manager, offering suggestions on performances and generally keeping the actors "in line." However, Elliott recalls that he had been rather unpopular with the designers and stage hands. Boston, who could easily communicate with the crew, was now

immersed in learning to "call" the show and had little time to maintain the actors' performances.

After Lady opened, Elliott busied himself with Up Against It; weeks would go by before he would drop by the show. The situation began to parallel the circumstances during the run of Psycho Beach Party. Busch felt that in Elliott's absence, Vandergriff had really helped maintain the show, and that Boston did not give enough performance notes:

Meghan started doing all her mugging and nobody could stop her, and Theresa started doing her basic sing-song, and Bobby was making faces and Arnie began to snort and make all these noises. It drove me crazy. That's why I wasn't upset when it closed at all, because the performance was very sloppy.⁴⁵

Julie Halston adds that the company's spirit was at a low point:

I also think we were very frightened. Think about it. We were with a woman who we knew was very ill. Albert Poland [the general manager] was nowhere to be found, audiences were dwindling, and our director was not around. It was scary.⁴⁶

Kenneth Elliott agrees about the performance's deterioration:

I went to the last performance, sat in the balcony and was appalled. I was embarrassed as I sat there. I thought, oh my God, what are these people doing up here. If this had been a week ago, I would have called a rehearsal to correct the problems. I just decided after that I wasn't going to let that happen to a show that ran again. I made a point of coming to Red Scare at least once every two weeks. Because I wasn't going to let that slip.⁴⁷

The sad irony in this episode is that the production that had gotten the best reviews, that was initially Limbo's most sustained work as a company, was plagued with low morale, inconsistent performances, and backstage bickering.

By October, a perplexing trend was noticed: box office attendance was steadily dropping. The cast and management were bewildered because the rave review from

the New York Times had led them to believe a long run was assured. \$150,000 was spent on a television commercial to boost ticket sales, but to no avail. Audiences dwindled, and finally, on 3 December 1989, The Lady in Question closed, having given a total of fourteen previews and one hundred and fifty-one performances. The entire investment was lost. As Limbo's press agent Sam Rudy said, "it was one of the more sensational, or head-scratching failures on or off Broadway in 1989."⁴⁸ The question remains why, with such good reviews, did Lady not run longer?

Most of the company blame the advertising campaign. The sniper campaign, in which large theatre posters were pasted up all over town, was not as extensive as it should have been. Instead, radio spots were made, and an expensive television commercial was shot, which used up most of the advertising reserve fund, resulting in fewer newspaper ads. Brian Whitehill states that in its final weeks, people thought the show had already closed.

To make matters worse, the television commercial was not effective. Shot to resemble a movie, with many sequences and rapid editing, it was confusing. By the time the commercial had been completed, ticket sales had begun to drop off and there was little money left in the reserve fund to buy television air time. The commercial ended up playing a few times on a TNT, a cable television channel which showed old movies. As Whitehill notes, "you don't know if this is just an old movie you are watching, because it looked like a movie trailer."⁴⁹ Elliott agrees:

I wish Albert [Poland] had not persuaded me to go along with that commercial. It was wonderful, but it didn't sell any tickets . . . it was a mistake.⁵⁰

Moreover, the advertising campaign did not present an image that told audiences what to expect. Even though this was Limbo's most contained work, it still featured cross-dressing and presented a performance informed by a camp sensibility. Yet the photograph of Busch in the print ads was glamorous; his facial expression showed no hint that this was a parody. Warmly glowing, holding a flower against his cheek, he looked legitimately like a woman. The play's title, often a selling point with a Limbo production, was hardly amusing or provocative. The conclusion cast members and designers arrive at was that Lady was not properly marketed.

However, Kyle Renick strongly disagrees with that consensus:

The word of mouth was not strong enough, and if we hadn't spent that money on the t.v. spot, what would it have done? Bought another newspaper ad? Two newspaper ads? Kept us going at a loss for a few more weeks? The key to a successful run in the theatre is word of mouth. Period. And we didn't have that going for us.⁵¹

Renick was right. Even if the show had been kept open for several more weeks, word of mouth was not helping to increase ticket sales.

Busch has often said that his plays have a built-in three month run; once his cult audience is exhausted, ticket sales drop. Vampire Lesbians, of course, is the notable exception, but one of the magic ingredient there was a low rent on the theatre (see Chapter Four). For several reasons, the Orpheum was the wrong theatre for Lady. The rent was high; in fact Lady's weekly running costs were the highest of any Limbo show (according to Renick, it was about \$40,000). With three hundred and twenty seats, the Orpheum was also the largest house the company had played.⁵² And, unlike the Provincetown and Players Theatre, it was difficult to fill

the theatre because the Orpheum's location, on Second Avenue and Eighth Street, did not lend itself to walk-in ticket sales.

Lady's failure at the box office proved that, ultimately, the New York Times cannot make or break a show. Renick noted that Steel Magnolias, another WPA transfer, did not get a good Times review, yet ran three years and made a great deal of money. Rich gave Lady the best review of any show that had originated at the WPA, and yet it ran only four months. In fact, although Rich's review was a tremendous validation of Limbo's work, it may have had a negative effect on audiences. Sam Rudy, who spent a good deal of time at the Orpheum that summer, observed:

I would see people there and think, these people have read that review of Frank's and have come here to see the wheel re-invented on stage. I think it sent a lot of people down to that theatre to see Charles's work and they weren't prepared. Their expectations were tremendous. They thought they were going to have this gut busting experience of their lives. They didn't get it because they didn't know what there was to get.⁵³

What audiences didn't seem to appreciate, yet what was even more transparent because the outrageous humor was held in check, was the gay sensibility that permeated the production. The Lady in Question is the only Limbo play that does not have a gay character, yet Peter Bowen of Outweek noted at the time that "while nothing *in* the play is particularly gay, everything *about* it is."⁵⁴ Camp, as an expression of the gay sensibility, even though focused and sustained in a disciplined piece of work, seems to carry with it boundaries of address which exclude a sizeable portion of the mainstream heterosexual audience. Busch may have shown himself to be a "shrewd, commercial theatre artist," but Lady's failure proves that he had not, as some critics remarked, established himself with the general theatre-going audience.⁵⁵

Three months after Lady closed, Busch and members of the company opened a two month run of Vampires in Los Angeles, but they would not do another show in New York for a year and a half.⁵⁶ The ties that had held the original group together were getting ever more tenuous; some were broken forever. Bobby Carey, like Meghan Robinson, was also suffering from AIDS. Although still healthy, he left Lady before it closed to live in Los Angeles. His last appearance with Theatre-in-Limbo was in the Los Angeles production of Vampires. Too ill to appear in Red Scare on Sunset, he died on 27 June 1991. Carey's value within the company is difficult for outsiders to measure. Although his performances grew in competency, they were never more than serviceable. But within the company, his role was significant on an interpersonal level; he brought chicken soup to ailing company members, sometimes acted as Busch's "unofficial" dresser, and was always friendly and welcoming to new cast members. If the company viewed itself as an extended family, then Carey seems to have provided a good deal of the glue which held it together.

Meghan Robinson, a more difficult personality for some, also filled a need in the company, which had always been intrigued with singular personalities. She gave the rest of group something to gossip about. But she also gave Busch a personality for which to write that fit ideally with the style and persona he was projecting in Theatre-in-Limbo. Like Carey, Lady was Robinson's last production with Limbo. Her health steadily worsened, and she died on 18 November 1990. There is a theatre saying that is often uttered to deflate a swollen ego: no actress is irreplaceable. But

Robinson may be one of the exceptions which prove the rule. Busch and Elliott never found an actress to take her place.

The Lady in Question was, in many ways, the apotheosis of Theatre-in-Limbo. Certainly the type of entertainment that the company had begun to present at the Limbo Lounge found its most resonant expression in this play. Nominated for an Outer Critics Circle Award, the Orpheum production, in its early performances, was Theatre-in-Limbo's finest hour in distilling actors' trips and combining personality and role to make a dynamic theatre experience. Unfortunately, this was the last production in which all the original company members (except for Tom Aulino) performed.

Even though Lady's run was disappointing, the next play would have to compete with the glowing notices it had received from some of the most important papers. Lady was, perhaps, the company's most polished work, the one most easily enjoyed as simple entertainment. But Theatre-in-Limbo's next effort, Red Scare on Sunset, was, without doubt, their most daring and experimental piece; one in which drag performance added a unsettling complexity to an examination of political extremism. With this play, Theatre-in-Limbo began to expand the boundaries they had set for themselves in producing their style of genre parodies.

NOTES

1. Kyle Renick, interview by author, 9 April 1991, tape recording, New York City.
2. Ibid.
3. Sam Rudy, press agent, Shirley Herz Associates, Memorandum to Enid Nemy, TD [photocopy], 14 November 1988, property of author, New York City.
4. At one point during the cast process of Just Say No, Kramer asked Busch to play the Nancy Reagan character in drag; Busch declined.
5. Charles Busch, interview by author, 12 November 1991, tape recording, New York City.
6. Terry Helbing, "Beyond Broadway," New York Native, 3 October 1988. Lady was announced under the earlier working title in Helbing's column.
7. Frank Krutnik and Steve Neale, Popular Film and Television Comedy, (London: Routledge, 1990), 43-61. See Krutnik and Neale for an extensive discussion of various forms of comic structure, as well as an exploration of relevant film, radio, and television genres, such as "screwball" comedy and silent film slapstick.
8. Charles Busch, "The Lady in Question," (1988, WPA version), TMs, p. 56, property of author, New York City.
9. Ibid., p. 19.
10. Two video tapes were made during Lady's run at the WPA. The first presents a somewhat ragged dress rehearsal (17 November 1988), while the latter, taped during the final weekend of the show (10 December 1988), shows a polished and confident cast. The Orpheum Theatre production was taped on 1 September 1989. All comments on performance in this study are based on close study of these three documents, as well as the author's observations while attending two performances at the Orpheum (23 September and 22 November 1989).
11. Charles Busch, "The Lady in Question, 1988, WPA version," p. 6.
12. Ibid., p. 31.
13. Ibid., p. 6.

14. Foster Hirsch, Acting Hollywood Style (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), 71. See also Charles Affron, Star Acting (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977) for a study of the semiotics of film performance focusing on Gish, Garbo, and Davis. Affron's work is a meticulous analysis of the above actresses' work as viewed in specific films. Hirsch's book is a broad-based, serious study that offers a good introduction to the phenomenon of star acting in film.
15. Ibid., 72.
16. Ibid., 201.
17. Charles Busch, interview by author, 24 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
18. Busch, "The Lady in Question, 1988, WPA version," p. 42.
19. Clive Barnes, "No Question--the 'Lady' is a Champ," in New York Post, 26 July 1989.
20. Thomas Schatz, Hollywood Genres (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 6.
21. Charles Busch, "The Lady in Question, 1988, WPA version," p. 42.
22. Henri Focillon, Life of Forms in Art (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc, 1942): 10, quoted in Schatz, 37.
23. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," in A Susan Sontag Reader (New York: Vintage, 1983), 113.
24. Kyle Renick, interview, 9 April 1991. Even though Lady was accessible to a greater portion of the mainstream audience, Renick notes the contrast in audience response when a majority of gays were present. For example, when Gertrude shot the Baron and stood over his dead body, saying "And to think, you once ruled over the entire city of Shaffhausen," the gay audience recognized the reference to Tosca's line to the prostrate Scarpia. In this instance, the stereotype of gay men at a certain economic and educational level as "opera queens," can be seen as a legitimate aspect of the gay sensibility (see Bronski, 134). See also Wayne Koestenbaum, The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire (New York: Poseidon Press, 1993). Koestenbaum gives a highly subjective but fascinating account of the affinity of gay men for opera.
25. Michael Sommers, "The Limbo Look," Theatre Crafts (February 1990), 74. While focusing on The Lady in Question, Sommers' article gives a good overview on Whitehill, Leone, Carr, Glaser, and Locke and their work with Limbo. For more on Carr as Limbo wig designer, see Michael Kuchwara, "Interview with Elizabeth Katherine Carr," Associated Press, 8 October 1989.
26. Kyle Renick, interview, 9 April 1991.

27. Ibid. Busch felt there was already a built-in audience of Limbo fans for the WPA run. Renick also notes that, at the time, Busch was "gun-shy" of critics and thought they tended to dismiss him as "camp or gay or both."
28. Mort Swinsky, a member of the WPA board of directors, put up about a quarter of the capitalization. Rennick states that without Swinsky, the move would not have happened.
29. Timings are taken from videotaped performances at the WPA (10 December 1988) and the Orpheum Theatre (1 September 1989).
30. Brian Whitehill, interview by author, 26 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
31. Busch, "The Lady in Question, 1989, Orpheum version," 2-3-25.
32. Vivien Leone, interview by author, 22 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
33. David Rothenberg, review of The Lady in Question by Charles Busch, Chelsea Clinton News, 27 July 1989; David Lefkowitz, review of The Lady in Question by Charles Busch, Show Business, 2 August 1989.
34. Michael Kuchwara, "The Lady in Question," Associated Press, 26 July 1989.
35. David Patrick Stearns, "No Question--This Lady is a Hoot," USA Today, 26 July 1989.
36. Michael Feingold, "Divagations," Village Voice, 1 August 1989.
37. Ibid.
38. Rex Reed, "On the Town With Rex Reed," New York Observer, 21 August 1989.
39. Don Nelsen, "The Lady is a Camp," Daily News, 27 July 1989. Laurie Winer, "Norma Shearer Meets Parodist Drag Queen," Wall Street Journal, 3 August 1989.
40. Frank Rich, "Scene: Europe 1940. Subject: True Kitsch," New York Times, 26 July 1989.
41. Julie Halston, interview by author, 30 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.
42. Mark Hamilton, interview by author, 10 May 1991, tape recording, New York City.

43. Julie Halston, interview by author, 27 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.
44. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 5 November 1991, tape recording, New York City.
45. Charles Busch, interview by author, 24 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
46. Julie Halston, interview, 30 December 1991.
47. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 30 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
48. Sam Rudy, interview by author, 18 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.
49. Brian Whitehill, interview by author, 3 October 1992, tape recording, New York City.
50. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 12 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
51. Kyle Renick, interview, 9 April 1991.
52. According to Stubs (New York: Patricia and Ronald S. Lee, 1986): 77,73, the Provincetown Playhouse has one hundred and seventy five seats, the Players Theatre has two hundred and forty eight seats.
53. Sam Rudy, interview, 18 December 1991.
54. Peter Bowen, "Taking Camp, Seriously: Busch, New Age, and AIDS," Outweek, 7 August 1989.
55. Larry Myers, review of The Lady in Question, by Charles Busch, Stages, August-September 1989.
56. Joining Busch were Tom Aulino, Julie Halston, Andy Halliday, and Bobby Carey, who was now living in Los Angeles. The production began an open-ended run 6 March 1990 and closed on 13 May 1990. Busch made several revisions in Coma and Vampires for the Los Angeles production. The changes were put into the Off-Broadway production, as well. The current printing of the Samuel French acting edition incorporates these revisions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RED SCARE ON SUNSET: THE MAKING OF A LIMBO SHOW

As noted in the Introduction, the following chapter differs from its predecessors in its methodology. Since the author was present at many pre-production meetings and rehearsals of Red Scare on Sunset and attended several performances a week during the course of the WPA and Off-Broadway runs, a different kind of evaluation is possible than was the case with previous Limbo productions. A diary was kept during this period, and unless otherwise noted, all direct quotes in this chapter are taken from diary entries made at the time of the meeting/rehearsal/performance. This chapter reflects commentary and conclusions drawn from on-site observation. This was a fortuitous situation, for Red Scare on Sunset was a complex and problematic show, subject to many changes and revisions during rehearsals and previews. The chance to do this kind of field work resulted in a greater understanding than would otherwise have been possible of the artistic and commercial pressures that shaped the play's final form. Watching rehearsals and performances revealed Busch's continual struggle to reconcile his responsibilities as playwright and entertainer, a conflict that held great significance for his most ambitious play to date. Monitoring audience response, night after night, afforded a clearer picture of how Limbo's politicized camp was being received.

The hiatus between The Lady in Question and Red Scare on Sunset was even longer than the five month fallow period that followed Psycho Beach Party. After

Lady closed at the Orpheum (3 December 1989), Gordon Crowe presented Limbo's production of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom in Los Angeles on 6 March 1990.

Meghan Robinson was too ill to join the company, and Julie Halston took her place.

Other company members included Aulino, Halliday, Carey (now living in Los Angeles) and, of course, Busch. Due to economic restraints, the rest of the roles were cast in Los Angeles. Reviews were mixed and, after a little over two months, Vampire Lesbians closed on 13 May 1990. From that date until 5 March 1991, the company went their separate ways. Elliott directed Grotesque Love Songs by Don Nigro at the WPA the following fall, and Busch busied himself with a new libretto for House of Flowers, a musical written by Truman Capote and Harold Arlen that was revived for singer Patti Labelle.

In November, while Elliott's production of Grotesque Love Songs was playing at the WPA, Busch contacted Kyle Renick.¹ Busch had been absent from the New York stage for over a year and he longed to return in another Limbo show. He told Renick of an idea for a new play: he would be a movie star in Hollywood during the McCarthy era who gets knocked unconscious and dreams that she is Lady Godiva--a role which she is currently filming. As he had done with Lady, Renick had enough faith in Busch to agree to another unwritten play.

With the go-ahead from Renick for a March opening, Busch began a series of formal meetings with Elliott, the first of which occurred on 4 December 1990.² By 12 December, there was a scenario for the entire play. Beginning with this session on 12 December, the author was present to observe the collaborative process.³ Now called Godiva Takes a Ride, the play was set in Hollywood, 1951, during the

Communist witch hunts. Mary Dale, a well known movie star, is married to Frank Taggart, a Broadway actor with a drinking problem whose career is floundering. Mary's best friend is Pat Pilford, a famous comedienne with a popular radio show, who is a rabid right winger. Busch read the scenario to Elliott and the remainder of the meeting was taken up with Elliott's initial responses.

The 12 December scenario is of interest for several reasons. During the play's development, very little was altered or edited out of the Mary Dale story-line. At each script session, Busch incorporated Elliott's suggestions to fill out the seven original scenes and strengthen structure and character motivation. The scenario, which Busch and Elliott continued to use for reference in their January script sessions, is reproduced below, with bracketed comments by the author to clarify certain points:

Scene One: 1951. The scene is Mary and Frank's newly built beach house. Pat [Pilford] and Frank discuss Frank's doing a play in New York. Mary enters. She's upset Frank is meeting with the playwright Mitchell Drake that night canceling their dinner plans [it is their anniversary]. He leaves. She's invited Marta Towers to tea. Pat is appalled. Marta is a notorious pinko. She arrives. It's a tense tea party. Mary looks for Bermuda snapshots [where she and Frank recently vacationed] in Frank's sock drawer and finds his passport saying he's Moishe Nisowitz born in the Ukraine.

Scene Two: Late that night [at the beach house]. Malcolm, their gay houseman, lets Frank in [he is drunk]. He's in love with Frank. Mary is awake [she enters but is unaware that Malcolm has been trying to seduce Frank. Malcolm exits]. She confronts him with the passport, he gives her an alibi. He was embarrassed and never told her. She says she doesn't like Marta, he defends her. He says the next night he's going to the method acting class, the Yetta Felson Studio at Marta's urging. Mary wants to go. Frank patronizes her dedication to acting, she gets mad and throws him his bed clothes and says he's sleeping on the sofa. He storms out saying he'll sleep at the studio. She asks "with Marta?" He walks out.

Scene Three: Radio station. Pat is preparing for her latest diatribe against the pinko forces. Mitchell Drake [a Pulitzer prize winning playwright who is now writing screenplays] visits her. They were lovers in the thirties when he wrote sketches for the Follies. He blackmails her with pornographic photos he took of her unless she becomes a commie tool. She's helpless and accepts the new script he's written for

her. Says at first it will be subtle. He leaves. Mary is her guest. Mary is shocked when Pat's first line on the show is "Welcome comrade". During a break, Mary says she's concerned about Frank and this method acting class. Pat scared of the commie goon squads, warns her to stay away.

Scene Four: The Yetta Felson Studio. Marta, Mitchell, Malcolm, Frank, and R.G. [Benson], a famous director are discussing their plans to take over the industry. They put down Malcolm's ideas for sexual liberation. He decides to leave. They threaten him. Frank is dismayed. R.G. exits first [to follow Malcolm]. Mary sneaks in and sees Frank tormented by doubts and Marta seducing him. They discover Mary and Frank humiliates her by sending her home alone.

Scene Five: The [movie] studio. R.G. is filming Mary lipsinking a musical number in her new film "Lady Godiva". She can't continue. R.G. sits her down to discuss her problem. She can't be specific but she feels as if all her sacred values have been shattered. She then begins to suspect that R.G. too is a communist [when he repeats party propaganda she has overheard at the Felson studio]. He gives her a bottle of seconals to sleep. When he leaves, she takes an overdose and falls unconscious.

[The next four scenes comprise the "Godiva dream sequence."]

Scene Six: She dreams she is in the Eleventh Century. The town square. Mary is Godiva, a lusty peasant wench. Pat is her best friend Gwyneth, a clairvoyant. No one is supposed to know, otherwise she'd be condemned as a witch. She's an early feminist witch. A wicca. Mitchell is Barnaby, a village lout, a blacksmith. He's always trying to seduce Godiva. The young lord of Coventry, Leofric (Frank) enters with his page Thomas (Malcolm). Leofric is fresh from Wittenburg University. He is in disguise so he can see how the peasants really live and he is appalled at the conditions. The peasants however are perfectly happy. They don't miss better toilet facilities and roads and social services. He meets Godiva in some cute fashion that mirrors Mary and Frank's memory of their first meeting. It's love at first sight.

Scene Seven: A year later. The castle. Godiva has married Leofric and has become very high falutin and pretentious, worse than Lady Rowena (Marta) who wanted to marry Leofric and is now a spinster at court. Leofric's aged uncle Alastair (R.G.) is also at court, dismayed by Godiva's airs and Leofric's modern ideas. Leofric plans to heavily tax the peasants to pay for social security, medicaid, education etc. Godiva gets a visitor, Gwyneth, who pleads with her to get her husband to abandon the tax. Godiva is apathetic. Gwyneth tells her her next lives will pay for this and she shows her.

Scene Seven A: The island of Manhattan, 17th Century. Godiva and Gwyneth are Indians conned by dutch settlers into selling the land for a few trinkets.

Scene Seven B: Godiva is the mexican artist Frida Kahlo brutalized by her male chauvinist husband Diego.

Scene Seven C: ? [At the time he wrote this scenario Busch had no idea what to do with this scene. Later he added a sequence in which the Godiva story jumps to the present day. Busch and Julie Halston play performance artists who have been politically apathetic and now bemoan the fact they have been denied a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.]

Back in the Eleventh Century, Godiva sees Gwyneth's point and pleads with her husband to stop the tax. He laughs and says if she rides naked in the streets, he'll stop it.

Scene Eight: The village. Gwyneth tells Godiva all the peasants have agreed to stay in their homes so they won't look at her. Barnaby is very disappointed. Godiva drops her cloak, Gwyneth gives her a riding crop and Godiva takes her ride. No one looks. Only Thomas, Leofric's page peeps and goes blind.

Leofric and the court and peasants appear. Leofric accedes that he may have been overzealous and takes away the tax, Joy reigns.

Scene Nine: 1951. Mary wakes up in the hospital. Frank is with her very upset at almost losing her. Mary convinces him the communist way is wrong. Pat visits. Frank makes Pat confess she's being blackmailed. She breaks down and says it's true. Mary says they must get the photos. Frank tells her she mustn't. It's too dangerous. Malcolm visits her. He is being hounded by the communists. He can't take it anymore and so he jumps out the window. Mary is now convinced she must do something.

Scene Ten: That night, the Yetta Felson school. Frank tries to find the negatives. Marta finds him. Doesn't believe his alibi why he's there so late alone. She tries to seduce him, then berates him for his weakness and his lack of acting talent. They go upstairs to watch the scene study class. Mary and Pat sneak in looking for the negatives, they find them. They are caught by Mitchell who laughs and says what about the blue movie he made of Pat and produces it. Pat goes berserk, grabs the film and strangles Mitchell. R.G., Marta, and Frank appear with Yetta Felson (Andy [Halliday]). R.G. reveals himself to be an agent with the FBI working in tandem with Yetta also with the FBI. R.G. tricks Marta into revealing she is really Commissar Olga Kosavetskinaya who murdered the real Marta Towers in Mexico years before. Marta goes mad and Yetta leads her off to a waiting ambulance to take her to the psychopathic ward. R.G. convinces Frank to turn himself in. Mary says she'll be with him all the way.

Scene Eleven: Mary climbs the steps of Congress and before HUAC, she gives a rousing patriotic speech and names names including Frank's as the curtain falls.⁴

As can be seen from the scenario, tremendous importance was placed on the dream sequence. In fact, the Mary Dale story was little more than a framing device for the

Godiva pageant. After Busch read the scenario, he and Elliott began to address two problems which they would wrestle with throughout script sessions. The more obvious difficulty was that the Mary Dale story and the Lady Godiva section had no relation to each other.

The second problem, which became more significant when the play finally began public performances, was that Red Scare dealt with a period in American history which was still a sensitive issue for many people. Although Busch voiced his apprehension about the final scene to Elliott, the main object of their concern was integrating the dream sequence with the rest of the play. As Busch later admitted:

When Ken and I sat down and actually began to think about what this play could be, we both freaked out because it made no sense. There was no reason for Lady Godiva. She had nothing to do with the McCarthy era. It was like two different plays.⁵

The meetings between Busch and Elliott were rather low-keyed and formal. It was evident, however, that the two men had forged a bond of trust which enabled them to work quickly and productively.

Just before the 12 December session, Busch and Elliott had visited the Museum of the Moving Image and seen two Hollywood films made during the Blacklist era that greatly influenced the play's development: The Red Menace (1949) and The Woman on Pier 13 (1949, initially released as I Married a Communist). Busch borrowed a good deal of his plot from these two films. The anti-Communist film genre featured femme fatales who lured unsuspecting males into the party; Communist leaders who behaved like Chicago gangsters; and hapless victims who were hounded by the party until they jumped to their deaths from convenient windows. All these conventions were duly noted by Busch and incorporated into the

script. The Red Menace contained a particularly lurid scene in which a female Communist goes mad and confesses she is a Russian spy who murdered an American citizen in Mexico in order to assume her identity. Busch was so taken with this that he hardly re-worked it for Marta Towers' final break-down.

As the Mary Dale plot filled out with material taken from the films cited, casting began to take shape. At the 12 December meeting the following company members had already been contacted: Charles Busch (Mary Dale), Arnie Kolodner (Frank Taggart), Julie Halston (Pat Pilford), Andy Halliday (Malcolm, Yetta Felson), and Ralph Buckley (Mitchell Drake). Busch wrote Marta Towers for Judith Hansen (who had understudied the women in Lady and played Deedee in Psycho Beach Party). Roy Cockrum, a Northwestern alumnus, who had been a cast replacement in Vampire Lesbians, was asked to play the Communist leader, Barker (not in the scenario), and Mark Hamilton, who played Mittelhoffer and Dr. Maximilian in Lady, was cast as R.G. Benson.

By the next script session (4 January), Godiva Takes a Ride was a two act play with an intermission after the dream sequence (Scene Eight in the scenario). Busch had written a first draft of Act One, and several suggestions Elliott made at the previous session had already been assimilated. For instance, the romantic triangle between Mary, Marta, and Frank had been reinforced by adding a scene after Scene One between Frank and Marta on a fog bound pier at night. Marta convinces Frank to join her acting class at the Yetta Felson studio by seducing him with play titles ("Think of how much fun we'd have doing The Lower Depths, The Weavers, Saint Joan of the Stockyards").⁶

Elliott's suggestions during the 4 January meeting continued to give the Communist plot more prominence. At this point, Barker and the Party had no clear-cut plan of sabotage and no reason for wanting Frank Taggart as a member. Elliott proposed that the Communists should try to shut down the film studio or take control of it to use as a tool for propaganda. When Mary Dale visits the Yetta Felson studio in Scene Four, she should overhear the take-over plot. She is discovered and after she leaves, Barker decides she knows too much. Frank is blackmailed into killing her. With Mary's life now in danger, narrative tension and suspense were intensified; how would she escape the Communist thugs? Before the script session broke up, Elliott and Busch again tried to link Mary's situation to the dream. Elliott proposed that the dream should bring about a change in Mary and force her to take a public stand on the Communist issue.

Two weeks later (25 January) Busch and Elliott met again. A first draft of the play had been completed four days before. Almost all of the recommendations Elliott had made during the previous meeting had been added to the script. Mary Dale's story had been built up, and the play was re-titled Hysteria: A Red Scare Comedy. The motivation for Mary's suicide attempt, which precipitated the dream, was now strengthened by three traumatic events in quick succession: Mary's suspicion that R.G. is a Communist; her shock at Pat's spouting of Communist propaganda on radio; and Frank's attempt to kill her.

A prologue was added in which Pat fires an actor during her radio broadcast because she suspects him of being a Communist sympathizer. To help Busch with ideas for Pat's radio show, Elliott brought over a recording of old radio comedy and

played an episode of Fibber McGee and Molly; later, Busch wrote a character with a thick Swedish accent which he first heard on this recording.

The 25 January script session was the last major meeting Busch and Elliott scheduled before rehearsals began on 5 March at the WPA. On 26 January, Elliott left for Los Angeles, where he planned to be an observer on the set of Santa Barbara (a television daytime drama). But by this point, except for the opening scene on Pat's radio show, the script was more or less in the form that would be given to the cast the following month. By 31 January, the play again changed titles and was finally re-christened Red Scare on Sunset. The series of titles charted the growing emphasis on the Red-baiting melodrama.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these pre-production script meetings. Elliott's participation was vital to the final form and shape of Red Scare. His skill at shaping linear narrative, his sensitivity to cause and effect in building dramatic tension, and his methodical approach to character motivation helped give the play a solid foundation. Essentially, Elliott gave a structure to Busch's imagination. But he did not write the play; the dialogue, as well as the giddy circumstances of the plot (e.g. a poisoned necklace as a murder weapon) were pure Busch. Nor would Busch accept all of Elliott's suggestions. He had a definite image of his characters and what they might or might not do. But like many playwrights, he needed an editor.

The typical procedure for Busch, as observed during the script sessions, would be to talk over scenes with Elliott, write a first draft, meet with Elliott again, and then go back to the play and "track" the characters (adding lines to flesh out individual characteristics of a role). Then he would go back to the script again and

begin to "cut the fat," trimming unnecessary dialogue. In discussing Red Scare while it was in rehearsal, Kyle Renick described Busch's technique:

There is barely a wasted word in a Charles Busch play. He can characterize with the minimum details unlike anybody I can name. He draws people really fast and very specifically, and he is so economic with details that he pulls away, he keeps pulling away rather than putting things in. He can tell an incredibly good story with a minimum amount of information . . . I would be hardput to tell if he were a better storyteller or a better actor. Perhaps, like Charles Ludlam, he is one of those very rare people who is equally skilled at both . . . I know Charles doesn't like to be compared to him . . . [but] that narrative economy was something that Ludlam had too, and it is very rare.⁷

Busch's ability to tell a story in concentrated form and broad strokes was a valuable asset since his plays were distinguished by the narrative force of melodrama and the conventions of genre.

But Red Scare was, in fact, two plays: a typically campy costume pageant reminiscent of Theodora, Pardon My Inquisition, and Vampire Lesbians, and a more naturalistic melodrama foreshadowed by The Lady in Question. Busch had begun to write Red Scare as a costume spectacle and had sold it to Kyle Renick as such, but the more he wrote, the more he strayed from what he had done in the past. Godiva was the typical Busch heroine: the proletarian who had clawed her way up the economic and social ladder. Self-involved, tenacious, and tough, she had created a new identity for herself, but her roots were pure lower class. This was the typical camp creation that had served Busch so well in the past.

But Mary Dale was a departure. Unlike other Busch protagonists, who were aware of a moral right and wrong but chose to be self-serving, Mary Dale is myopic. She doesn't even realize her butler is gay and in love with her husband. She is defined by a gender blueprint that had been drawn up by the repressive American

society of the 1950s. To have this role played by a man in drag is a striking coup de théâtre.

But Busch was apprehensive about such a radical departure from the expected. The Godiva dream was included because he knew it would be a crowd pleaser.

While Red Scare was in rehearsal, Busch noted:

I think I was afraid the audience wasn't going to warm towards me, Mary Dale. I usually play a more outlandish, fun gal. I think I put the Godiva thing in so that at least for fifteen minutes, she would be in a more reassuring light, a tough gal with a heart of gold.⁸

The insecurity which Busch experienced as a playwright also plagued the actor. He was never truly confident that audiences would accept a more restrained performance in a less outrageous play. When the previews began, this doubt manifested itself in a constant struggle between his instincts as a clown and his desire to give a disciplined, focused characterization.

On 24 January, a day before the final script session, the entire production team held a meeting at the WPA.⁹ Along with the designers, members of the WPA staff were also present.¹⁰ This was to be the most technically ambitious production Theatre-in-Limbo had attempted, and one of the most complicated ones that the WPA had yet produced. Theatre-in-Limbo had certainly come a long way from an under-\$50-budget for the original production of Vampire Lesbians. In contrast to the \$2000-3000 spent on a Limbo show during the 1984 season at the Limbo Lounge, production costs at the WPA for Red Scare approximated \$85,000 for a six week run.¹¹

The primary issue at the production meeting was money or, rather, the lack of it. Red Scare's costume plot was massive; eleven medieval pieces and twenty-eight

from the 1950s. Costume designer Debra Tennenbaum, who had done Coma (Limbo Lounge) and Times Square Angel (Provincetown Playhouse), needed \$3100 more than was budgeted for costumes in order to rent and build certain pieces. In an effort to close the budget gap, Elliott suggested that a week be dropped from the three-week rehearsal period. At the time Busch quipped, "What are we going to do the second week?" That remark would later come back to haunt him, for Red Scare would emphatically need a three, even four week rehearsal period.

Rehearsals began on Tuesday, 5 March for a 19 March opening. After a read-through of the play, Elliott began blocking immediately, and by Friday the actors were "off-book" and beginning run-throughs. After several rehearsals, it became apparent that the script was putting new demands upon the actors. In Lady, the company had played the quintessence of all the roles they had been given in the past, with Busch skillfully tailoring each character to the personality of the actor--Halston, the wise-cracking best friend; Kolodner, the slightly seedy leading man; Halliday, the grotesque drag role. But the characters in Red Scare were not simply two dimensional stereotypes, and Busch privately voiced his apprehensions about the company's ability to bring out the nuances of the play.

Halliday, for example, was finding it difficult to capture Malcolm's distraught and pathetic qualities that emerged in the second act hospital scene just before his suicide. Halston also had trouble giving Pat the emotional depth required. But even in rehearsal, it was evident that Halston had grown into the "personality" actress par excellence, and her extraordinary audience appeal carried her through moments where technique failed her.

Elliott had no patience with letting actors explore the physical space and find the moment by experimentation; he was not an acting coach. A scene was immediately staged and then rehearsed until Elliott was satisfied with the way it looked and sounded. If an actor continued to have trouble with a moment, Elliott was not opposed to giving a line reading. In the past, this had been the ideal way to work with the kind of plays Busch had written for the company, but Red Scare was not sketch comedy nor outrageous farce in which the actor's personality substituted for characterization. During rehearsal, when an actor was having difficulty, Elliott would explain and justify the moment in very clear terms, as he had done in the past. But he did not have the time or patience to use improvisations or acting exercises as tools to guide the actor to an area of self-discovery. Ralph Buckley commented:

Like George Abbott, Ken is a director, not an actor. He tells you what he wants, and it's your job to do it. He is kind of old school, but I don't expect my director to get me there. That is my job, to get me there.¹²

But not everyone in the company was capable of "getting there" by themselves, and for the first time since he began working with Limbo, Arnie Kolodner, without Elliott's knowledge, sought out an acting coach to help him cope with the problems he was encountering with the script.

Busch, himself, took direction well, and his work in rehearsal was a revelation. His portrayal was vulnerable and touching. Mark Hamilton later observed that Busch and Halston needed an audience before they would give a performance, and that judging his work during rehearsals could be deceptive, but in the author's opinion, Busch was giving the most legitimate characterization he had yet attempted. Even his physical and vocal references to film star acting, which had been

so much a part of his comic arsenal in Lady, were held in check. Furthermore, he played on a sensitive, moment-to-moment level with his fellow actors which would have surprised those who had only known his acting work from previous Limbo productions. The result was that Mary Dale's story was animated with an urgency and dramatic weight missing from earlier Limbo productions.

Unfortunately, the same could not be said for the Godiva sequence, which reverted to the style of entertainment for which the company was known. More importantly, the dream refused to integrate with the rest of the play. The dramatic tension which built through the first act was dissipated by a costume pageant which still had nothing to do with Mary Dale.

After the run-through on Saturday, 9 March, Elliott turned to T.L. Boston, the stage manager, and said, "I think the whole thing [the Godiva sequence] should be cut." The cast was dismissed and what followed was unique in the company's experience; an impromptu meeting in the WPA dressing room of Elliott, Busch, Whitehill, Tennenbaum, and Boston, during which the dream sequence was totally revised by group effort.

After the company had gone home, Elliott went to Busch's dressing room and approached him about completely cutting the Godiva sequence; Busch agreed. Elliott then asked Tennenbaum to join them, and soon after, Whitehill wandered in. When the designers were told of the plans to cut the dream, they naturally urged Busch and Elliott to reconsider; after all, they had spent a good deal of time and energy on creating scenic and costume elements that would now be discarded. Tennenbaum and

Whitehill immediately began to offer suggestions. When T.L. Boston dropped by, Busch announced that no one was leaving until he had a new dream sequence.

Finally, Whitehill came up with an interesting concept. The dream, he said, should be a nightmare that takes place on the beach house set. Mary takes the pills, collapses, and the Godiva characters drift on. Mary would remain herself throughout the dream while everyone else would address her as Lady Godiva. The three visions (see scenario) would be cut and the entire sequence would now exude a surreal atmosphere justified by Mary's emotional state and her physical condition after taking the sleeping pills. Later, Whitehill observed:

I was just trying to point them in the right direction. And for them to get what they want. It's that kind of cross-pollenization that Limbo has. We all help each other get to where that other individual wants to get to. That's where the trust comes in. You are not going to let somebody lead you or point you unless you really trust each other.¹³

The next day, however, Elliott noted that the amount of Whitehill's participation was quite unusual for him:

But you have to remember where the designers are coming from. She [Tennenbaum] wants to save her costumes and he [Whitehill] wants to save his horse. I had no ideas. I was just listening.¹⁴

Busch was listening, too, and on his day off, Monday, 11 March, he wrote a new seven-page scene, "Mary's dream." The following day, he revised it, trimming unnecessary dialogue, and spoke of the new concept:

The idea is to definitely make it a surreal dream and not have it any real defined narrative, just impressionistic vignettes that are not longer than three or four lines. She is going to stay Mary Dale, like an actor's nightmare with people calling her Godiva, and she doesn't quite fit in. She still thinks she's Mary Dale. Julie comes on as the court jester, to parallel her comedienne status in the real story. They are all basically playing who they are but in the context of medieval times.¹⁵

In the new dream Mary collapses on the floor of the beach house and two men in medieval costume enter and place banners on either side of the stage. Marta enters as Lady Prudwen, helps Mary up, and begins dressing her in a golden gown.

Figures in medieval costume enter: Arnolph (Mitchell), Baldric (Barker), Leofric (Frank) and Thomas the Monk (Malcolm). They tell Leofric they will kill the king and put him on the throne. Mary is totally disoriented ("Where are the cameras? Where's my publicist? What are my lines?").¹⁶ All the characters address Mary as "Lady Godiva," despite her protests ("Frank, look at me. I'm not Lady Godiva. That's just a role I play. I'm Mary Dale Taggart. No, that's not me. I'm Mary Dale. No, that's my stage name. I'm Mary Louise Hofstetter").¹⁷ The others call her mad, and Mary recites a re-write from the Godiva movie she is currently shooting. This was the only speech retained from the earlier dream sequence. Filled with cant and pseudo Elizabethan dialogue, sprinkled with invented words like "croff" and "woosel," this set piece gave Busch the opportunity to perform a *tirade*, in a parody of the classically trained actor spewing out lines in a deliberately artificial manner.

The *tirade* has no effect on the other characters, who scream for her death and exit. In desperation, Mary calls for Pat, who enters as a court jester. She bubbles with excitement about her new television situation comedy and runs off. Lost and forsaken, Mary decides to throw herself into the moat and runs offstage. At this moment, the heart of the dream takes place. The ghost of Mary's grandmother, Granny Lou, appears and admonishes her for thinking of suicide:

Granny Lou. [directing lines out at audience] Mary-Godiva, don't you dare throw yourself into that water. You come over here . . . I know you've missed me, but

the funny thing is I've been with you every second of the day . . . There's a whole slew of us watching over you. Maudie, Aunt Olive. We sure do love you. But honey, we're a bit disappointed, seeing you giving up like that. We know you've got that Hofstetter gumption in you. Now use it, honey. Save yourself and save your husband. He's not a bad man, just so very scared. Save him, darlin'. One little person can make a difference, you know. But sometimes you gotta do something--oh do something kind of crazy to make people stand up and take notice. You'll know what that is. We don't need to tell you. My dear one, you shall prevail. You shall prevail.¹⁸

Granny Lou walks off, repeating her final line. The scene switches back to medieval times. Thomas the Monk describes Godiva riding naked on a horse and is immediately struck blind. Behind him the lights go up on Godiva riding the horse. As the crowd cheers, the lights go out, and in the dark, Granny Lou's voice is heard to repeat "You shall prevail, you shall prevail." When the lights come up again, Mary is in the hospital. Frank is by her bedside, pleading, "Come back to me Mary. Please don't die." Mary opens her eyes:

Mary. [startled] Am I naked?

Frank. No, my darling. You're alive. You've come back.

Mary. Am I in a hospital? Have I gone mad?

Frank. You tried to kill yourself and it was all my fault.

Mary. Yes, you tried to murder me. That wasn't a dream.

Frank. There's so much to explain.

Mary. Tell me now. The truth.

Frank. The communist party knew I'd accidentally killed my childhood friend. They threatened to expose me unless I . . . Unless I murdered you. It was as if they had hypnotized me. I should have killed myself.

Mary. No, Frank, that's the coward's way out.¹⁹

The dream has given Mary the strength to protect her husband and Pat, and the new material now segues into the old hospital scene.

The new dream worked. Its proximity to the lipsynching sequence, which now opened Act Two, helped to link it to the movie about Godiva that Mary was shooting. More importantly, Busch never transformed into the wisecracking Godiva, which had given the dream the flavor of a typical Limbo divertissement. The playing time of the new Godiva sequence was only six minutes; over fourteen minutes had been cut.

When Busch delivered the new material to Elliott and the actors, a week remained before the first preview (Tuesday, 19 March). Rehearsal time was at a premium. Given the size and finances of the WPA, the technical demands for Red Scare were huge, and T.L. Boston began to complain about the lack of experienced crew. Whitehill's set was presenting difficulties for cast and crew alike.

In the past, a Limbo set design had featured a monolithic backdrop, which pushed the action toward the audience in a presentational manner. Lady, as discussed in the last chapter, was an exception, an inherited design which Whitehill modified. But the set for Red Scare was a radical departure for a Limbo show. To accommodate the many exterior and interior scenes, Whitehill created a unit set where, with a minimum of furniture and props, the scene could quickly change from the Taggart living room to a pier or a department store.²⁰

The design consisted of a series of steps and platforms receding upstage, with a ramp leading to the highest platform, where the pier scene with Frank and Marta took place.²¹ This platform also held a trap door out of which Godiva's

horse could be raised and lowered. All this surrounded a shallow downstage well on which the beach house furniture was placed. The furniture (a sofa and coffee table stage left and a chair stage right) was actually resting on plywood bases which could be rolled into cabinets on either side of the stage. The office furniture, a desk, chair and two filing cabinets were brought on in the dark and placed on steps above the acting well. Just above these steps was a narrow platform running the length of the stage with a door on either side for entrances and exits.

Above the stage, on tracks, was a white panel, ten feet wide by eight feet high, that could move up or down stage. When the audience came in, they saw the panel in its downstage position, with the logo Red Scare on Sunset projected on it, looking like a newspaper headline. In this position, it served as a backdrop for the radio station scene; then it traveled halfway upstage to serve as a bay window for Mary's beach house, this time with clouds projected on it; finally, its upstage positions were reserved for the pier, the office (tilted toward the audience to resemble a ceiling), the dream, and Mary's address to the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Although Whitehill's set served the play admirably, it was an obstacle course for the actors, who had to maneuver entrances and exits around perilous steps and narrow playing areas, sometimes while wearing floor length costumes. When the set was finally built and the company began to work on it, stage movement had to be intricately choreographed so that actors didn't trip or crash into one another. When performances began, Roy Cockrum spoke for the entire cast when he said, "it is a hard set to work on, I've bumped into more than one wall."²² Mark Hamilton

describes a set change that, because of time constraints, had never been rehearsed in full light so that the actors could see what was happening:

Getting off with the director's chair in the black-out after the movie studio [Act Two, scene one], I carry it out in the black. Someone is coming out and striking the fire bucket, which is directly in my path. Charles [Busch] is also crossing directly in my path and exiting at the same time I am going up the stairs with the chair. Exactly where I am going, they are swinging out the film unit [a flat used as background for Mary's lipsynching scene]. In avoiding that I oftentimes go smashing into the phone unit [for Malcolm's street scene]. One of the guys just reaches out and grabs my arm and somehow drags me into the wings.²³

Hamilton added that it took several weeks into the run before the actors felt comfortable about moving on the set.

The office furniture posed further problems. Whitehill wanted a feeling of paranoia and disorientation so he designed the desk as if it had been collapsed into a two dimensional form, resembling a sculptural relief. Although the chair was functional, behind it were two file cabinets that appeared to be a painted cut-out with distorted edges and odd angles reminiscent of the expressionistic designs in the film The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1919). With characteristic wit, Whitehill gave practical doors to the seemingly two-dimensional desk and file cabinet. But unfortunately, there were almost no horizontal surfaces. In fact, the top of the desk was almost perpendicular to the floor. Elliott had to re-stage the Act One office scene where a good deal of business revolved around toasting with glasses of vodka.

Because of its physical structure, Whitehill's set exercised far more control over the *mise en scène* than in the past. But it contributed to one of the more arresting aspects of Red Scare's picturization, for the conflict between characters in a scene was now visualized through spatial dimensions. The dynamics between

characters could be conveyed by placing actors on different levels. The flats were angled to each other as if they were closing in on the stage, its edges painted with jagged lines, a graphic device often used to denote tension. The entire set looked as if it were pulling away from the proscenium. The proscenium itself was given a metallic look to reflect sound stage doors. Each metallic panel carried symbols to give the audience the play's flavor: a camera, a film strip, a hammer and sickle, a horseshoe.

While Whitehill's set was his most innovative work with the company, the design elements, like the play itself, did not fit together as a consistent whole. The office, with its expressionistic furniture, was certainly of a different style than the beach house tubular set pieces. And Godiva's horse, with its self-conscious theatricality (stylized head, inflatable fabric body, and moveable feet, which got a tremendous audience response when they began to canter), was right out of the old style Limbo--the look of cheap theatrics.

For the first time, Elliott engaged a sound engineer, Guy Sherman, to design the sound plot. While Elliott was in Los Angeles, Sherman began sending him tapes of popular songs of the early 1950s, and by the time Red Scare was in technical rehearsal, there was an intricate series of sound cues to cover scene changes (Come On-a My House, The World is Waiting for the Sunrise, Undecided, Blacksmith Blues and other popular songs of the period) and orchestral passages (Miklos Rozsa's King of Kings). Musical scoring under dialogue was kept to a minimum.

Like Psycho Beach Party and Lady, Red Scare also contained playful film references. Voice-overs were used to represent Mary's inner thoughts as she

uncovers more and more of the Communist plot. At the same time, portentous chords crashed melodramatically, and Leone struck Busch's face with a harsh white light, as he painfully grimaced. Leone also used a film reference when Busch took the sleeping pills. As he swayed, just about to faint, two rotating gobos threw light on the stage in the form of pulsating star formations, a familiar graphic device used to indicate transitions into semi-conscious or dream states.

As the first public performance approached, T.L. Boston tried to manage the ever-increasing technical complications of the show. Many of his crew had other jobs and, as a result, the show's final moments did not receive a technical rehearsal until several weeks into the run. But to everyone's credit, the first preview on 19 March went smoothly. However, two things became evident that first night: the change in Busch's performance and the negative audience reaction when Mary Dale named Communist sympathizers.

As noted earlier, Busch was trying something new in rehearsals, an attempt to stay within the parameters defined by character. Andy Halliday, who was Busch's oldest friend and knew his work well, was impressed:

The whole show was becoming very subtle, this dark thing . . . [but] he started shticking it up because he was afraid of losing his audience.²⁴

Arnie Kolodner elaborated on this:

During Lady, he had everything figured out, he had every look, every bit, every take figured out. Red Scare was more about finding the moments rather than him pre-planning what he was going to do. This was a break-through, because this was much more real, not his movie star persona.²⁵

Busch was undoubtedly worried about whether his audience would accept him in a legitimate characterization. During the first preview, the entertainer overwhelmed the actor. Kolodner remembers:

As soon as the first night audience got there, he started doing a lot of movie-take line readings getting a lot of laughs that the audience recognized, and after the show he said, now we have to play it as if I am in one play and you are in another. You play it for real, but this is what the people want, this is what they expect of me, and this is what I've got to give them.²⁶

Busch began to make everything broader; his "takes," vocal references to movie stars, physical poses, and exaggerated emotional transitions. All the things in his comic stockpile were now employed to turn Mary Dale into a comic tour de force.

When questioned, Busch revealed an ambivalent attitude about his shift in performance. One moment he would agree with Hamilton's observation:

I think I always intended for the performance to be what it turned out to be. It is just in rehearsal I don't do those things. It is very hard in rehearsal to punch up those things. I just sort of assume that when I get the audience I'll do all that stuff. I probably should have left it alone, but I knew that once I had that audience, I knew that I was going to do that.²⁷

Another time, he admitted:

[The audience] is so seductive. It is a narcotic. When you get those real wild audiences it is exciting but it is not necessarily good for your art.²⁸

In fairness to Busch, once he became more secure in his work, the performance became more disciplined, but he never allowed himself to play with the honesty he had shown in rehearsals, and audiences were denied the opportunity to see a side of his talent which had not been shown since he stopped performing his solo pieces, and which had motivated him to write a more naturalistic role for himself in the first place. For many performers like Busch, who are skilled comedians, there will always be a war between the entertainer, for whom the audience's pleasure is the primary

mandate, and the actor, whose goal is to illuminate the play through his role, even at the risk of provoking the audience. Red Scare spotlighted that conflict because the audience was, in fact, offended by the play's conclusion.

Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that the play had a false "ending" which did not prepare audiences for the final scene. At the end of the hospital scene, Malcolm runs offstage and jumps to his death. On tape, the audience hears his fading scream and a resounding thud, as his body hits the ground. Pat, Mary, and Frank, physically react with a start. Then Mary grasps Frank and Pat's hands. With arms outstretched, she raises her face towards heaven and vows to protect them from the Communists. Triumphant music is heard as the actors freeze in a tableau. One could feel the audience's exhilaration at this moment; they were ready for a quick finale.²⁹ The next scene at the acting studio office quickly showed Mitchell's death, R.G.'s revelation that he is an F.B.I. agent, Barker's attempted escape, and Marta's nervous breakdown. At last, Frank turns to R.G.:

Frank. But what about my membership in the communist party? I may have just joined but I've been pink for years. Mary and I have discussed this and I'd like to go public and admit I was wrong. [*brightly*] We also thought it would be helpful if I gave the names of others I know to be disloyal.

R.G. I'm awfully glad to hear you say that, Frank. You may not work for awhile but oh, what satisfaction you'll have knowing your conscience is clear. You done good,

Mary. I'm terribly proud of my boy.³⁰

At this moment during that the preview, Elliott "felt the air go out of the room," as the audience grasped the implications of what was being said.³¹ But Julie Halston saved the moment with her characteristic brio:

Pat. (getting back her old sizzle) It's nice to see everything sewn up so neatly but where the fuck does a dame get a burger around here.

(Everyone laughs)

Mary. Oh Pat.

*Blackout.*³²

Pat's wisecrack acted as a "bucklebuster," a laugh line that receives a large reaction from the audience.³³ Indeed, even with revisions, Halston's line continued to get a big laugh and then an enormous hand at the blackout because it was also perceived as a formal closure to the play. But the lights came up again, as Pat announced on her radio show that Mary was in Washington, D.C. to give names to Congress. Then Mary marched on to the sounds of a patriotic band, stood in front of several microphones and addressed the House Committee on Un-American Activities. As she began to read a list of names she had procured from the Yetta Felson studio, images appeared behind her: the Capitol, the American flag, and cut-outs of the Statue of Liberty and Mount Rushmore held up on sticks. Although the preview audiences was appreciative, they were clearly disturbed by an ending that appeared to advocate blacklisting.

The response did not improve over the next several performances. Audiences seemed to misunderstand where Busch's sympathies lay. In his curtain speeches, he tried to diffuse the tension by telling them, "I'm up here in a dress, why would I be for blacklisting?" But his disclaimer came too late; few seemed prepared for the play's heroine to turn right wing informer and destroy careers.³⁴

Elliott and Busch decided that the satire must be sharpened by making the final moment more musically abrasive while the humor in Mary's speech would be pointed

up. On 9 April, Elliott added a section of music taken from the final movement of Charles Ives's Second Symphony. There are musical quotes from Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean, reveille, and finally an extended discordant chord, at which point the lights black out.

Meanwhile, Busch revised Mary's speech to make it more satirical. The original dialogue transformed Mary into a demagogue:

Mary. . . . Only in America, could the right to free speech be distorted and exploited by a corrupt foreign influence. They have taken our delicious freedom and forgive my vulgarity, kicked us in the you know what. We in show business must set an example to the rest of the country. We must represent honest emotion, traditional values, gay laughter, singing and dancing. That's entertainment. Definitely not obscene, pseudo-intellectual hogwash designed to amuse a decadent elite.³⁵

In his re-write, Busch cut this entire section and emphasized Mary as a product of Hollywood. When she reads the names of Communist sympathizers, she sounds as if she were announcing the winners at the Academy Awards. Here is the final version performed at the WPA:

Mary. (at the podium) Senators, Gentlemen, I stand before this august body terribly humbled. Only in America could a young girl raised by struggling farmers in Indiana grow up to be a movie star and also be able to speak to a distinguished panel of senators and may I add, most handsome [*winks seductively*]. The world is so complicated today. A girl doesn't know which way to turn. One wants to do the correct thing. But what is the correct thing? What's smart today, could be dumb tomorrow. But I had a dream about Lady Godiva, which is my latest film and I cordially invite all of you to the premiere at the Pantages. And from that dream I learned to apply the simple answers of a bygone era to the complicated questions of today. And that is why I am here before this congressional investigation to provide you with a list of names to aid you in your noble hunt to route out the red menace. Together with God's help, we can make sure that these people never work again. [*opens envelope*] My, this is very exciting. I name Marta Towers, Bertram Barker, and because I love him [*pause*] Frank Taggart. From the student roster of the Yetta Felson studio, I name Betty Foster, Jeff Patterson, Morris Kleiner . . . [*music up, Busch becomes inaudible, lights to silhouette, discordant chord and blackout*].³⁶

During the speech, Mary remains the embodiment of All-American values as presented by the Hollywood studios. But even with the revisions, which helped to clarify the playwright's attitude toward Mary's action, it still received mixed audience reactions. The problem seemed to be the play's overall tone, which did not prepare audiences for a dark conclusion. As with the "gay lib" parody in Psycho Beach Party, the satire was just not biting enough: Red Scare was confusing.

Busch's own performance created an obstacle to audience reception. The audience admired Busch and resented having to disapprove of his character. As Mary Dale, he was too charming and empathetic to distance the spectator, in order for the political satire to achieve its effect. The composition of the company may also have added to this problem in distancing. Gone were Limbo regulars Theresa Marlowe, Meghan Robinson, and Bobby Carey, actors who imbued their roles with distinctive personality traits, who specialized in celebrity acting and made suspension of disbelief more difficult. While Mark Hamilton, Judith Hansen, Roy Cockrum, and Ralph Buckley had all worked with Limbo before, their strong suit was versatility rather than a unique but unchanging manner. They played the character, rather than "the trip." The "core group" of the company (Kolodner, Halliday, and Halston), who did play a trip, all had roles with greater depth than usual. The result of this increased believability on the part of the performer was that audiences were pulled further into the world of the play. Gone was the extravagant camp of Vampire Lesbians, the anarchic humor of Psycho Beach Party, and the engaging mixture of parody and homage in Lady. The play's atmosphere of outrageousness was diminished, which left the audience ill-prepared for the shocking ending.

Even though the final sequence remained problematic throughout the run, Red Scare succeeded on several other levels. While Busch's own performance had less of a consistent through-line than his work in Lady, it did not appear erratic. What really held Busch's characterization together was Mary Dale's inability to distinguish between acting and real life. Busch's first entrance made this evident. During the entrance applause, Mary greets Pat and her husband as if they were long-lost friends; she takes an inordinate amount of time while she smiles, poses, and gushes, as much for the audience as for them. Eventually the entrance applause extends into a hand that acknowledges this bit, a parody of the star's first entrance. Later she purrs to Frank, "When I told that preacher 'till death do us part,' believe me I never spoke dialogue with more conviction."³⁷ Mary Dale has not only re-invented her life; she theatricalizes it as well.

In fact, no other Limbo play had contained so much discussion about the process of acting. The subject first comes up when Frank refuses to let Mary come to his Method acting class:

Frank. Mary, don't get worked up. They do a different kind of acting.

Mary. My kind of acting comes from the heart. My high school dramatics coach, Miss Helen Phipps, said I acted with the simple pure belief of a child. I'll compete any day with those pretentious intellectuals with their grunting and sweating.

Frank. Mary, you sound foolish. Great acting is uncovering depths of emotion that dare to be ugly, even repulsive. It's the exposure of the self in all of its raw truth.

Mary. Can I help it if I'm pretty and have a flair for fashion.³⁸

Later, in Act Two, Mitchell Drake discovers Mary and Pat in the Felson studio office:

Mitchell. You girls interested in signing up for a course in the method?

Mary. I have my own method, thank you. "Learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture."³⁹

There was always a strong response to Mary's line, far more than its humor warranted. While it was obvious that Busch was poking fun at the pretension and self-importance of certain approaches to Stanislavski-style actor training, the audience also seemed to be responding to Mary's rejoinder on another level. The laughter was not simply an acknowledgement of the Busch's wit, but a vocal approval of his philosophy of acting as well. Red Scare functioned, in part, as Busch's *apologia*.

As noted all through this study, Busch enjoyed reminding the audience of his male gender while performing in drag. But in Red Scare, the foregrounding of gender became subtler, more sophisticated. In Act One, scene three, Frank confesses the truth about his name to Mary, and she runs to his arms:

Mary. . . . if I ever found out you didn't love me, I think I'd kill myself . . . I would, I would kill myself. When I love, I love completely. It's my life. It's who I am.⁴⁰

At this point in the play, Busch's costume lends him an androgynous appearance; men's pajamas and high heels. He never employed a falsetto voice, but, rather, used rhythm and inflection to suggest femininity. The first part of his line was said with passionate sincerity. However, when he came to "it's who I am," Busch turned slightly out to the audience and suddenly dropped his voice into a unnaturally deep register, as he appeared to lampoon a manner of seductive behavior. At the same time, abetted by his costume of men's pajamas, he also made the audience aware of the whole pretense of his drag performance. The tension between complete exposure and playful deception was never stronger in a Limbo show than at this moment. The

audience responded with an intensity which might seem inappropriate unless their awareness of this interaction is taken into account.

Busch also played off his identity as a celebrity, as well as that of a male. The most complex moment of exposure took place in the opening of Act Two, when Mary is shooting a scene from her movie about Lady Godiva. Busch is now dressed in unmistakably feminine garb, a colorfully theatrical costume which is the studio's attempt at a "medieval look." Mary tells R.G. about her problems with Frank, and he gives her advice:

R.G. Lose yourself in work. Whatever your private hell is, use it in this role. Expose yourself. And be the great actress we know you can be.

Mary. The great actress. I wonder.

R.G. Mary, don't do this to yourself.

Mary. Let's be honest, we both know I'm not really an actress. I'm a glamorous personality. I've never appeared in a real role, in a real play. You can't call what I do acting.⁴¹

Busch gave his final line in a quiet, pensive manner. He dropped his theatrical, soigné delivery, and spoke in his natural voice and speech patterns. This was the only time in his Limbo performances that Busch ever went so far in dropping his theatrical mask. Even "I'm a glamorous personality," was quietly said in a flat delivery; very often it did not get a laugh. The transition was unsettling, and a hush spread over the theatre.⁴² For a moment, it seemed as if Busch had stepped out of character and, while admitting his celebrity status, was talking about the limitations drag set on his career. Audiences recognized this and listened intently, for by this time, it was clear that Red Scare was as much about Busch and his opinions on acting and popular entertainment versus high art as it was about political issues. If there had

any doubt about this, Busch had spelled it out the end of Act One when Mary tells the conspirators:

There always have been stars and there always will be stars. It's the reason one kitten stands out in a litter. It's part of the great cosmos around us. Politics come and go but the star system is eternal.⁴³

In many ways, Red Scare was Busch's most personal play. His viewpoints were all in the guise of humor, but Red Scare carried a level of seriousness that many critics noted.⁴⁴

When reviews began to appear, the new dream sequence met with critical approval, although several reviewers, such as Remy in Variety, found Red Scare's political position muddled.⁴⁵ Apparently, the subversive image of a man in drag, as the embodiment of All-American values, was lost upon them. In fact, Clive Barnes (New York Post) and Jan Stuart (New York Newsday) found a strong similarity between Mary Dale and Gertrude Garnet.⁴⁶ Michael Feingold, however, disagreed, and, in his criticism, again proved to be one of the most incisive appraisers of Limbo's work:

What makes Mary Dale different from earlier Busch heroines is that, instead of confining itself to film genre parody, her adorable triviality trespasses, in disturbing ways, on real life . . . For the first time in the series of playful pieces that began with Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, Busch has represented the difference between "normal" and "deviant" (gay, leftist, artist, whatever) as an unbridgeable gap. Where the earlier Busch heroines were either glamorous comic threats or equally glamorous gals-to-the-rescue, in the chilling last scene of Red Scare on Sunset, it's simple, good-hearted, well-meaning Mary Dale, with all her Middle American virtues, who turns out to be the horror at the core of the piece . . . In moving from Mary's dream to its lethal consequences, Busch goes beyond the jesting with right and left to kick at something nightmarish in the American character itself: the desperate, brainless optimism that insists that good "little people" can prevail without ever thinking about what they're doing, that the unexamined life is the only one worth living.⁴⁷

As was often the case in the past, the gay press treated Busch's work as more than just a frothy excursion into camp. Here is Michael Paller of Outweek:

Is Busch becoming political, making a serious statement about threats to personal expression? It's difficult to say. "I'm really so unpolitical, he declared in a recent interview in this magazine [Outweek, 10 April 1991], only to say later, "I think that, just by who I am, it's political." There are many ways of being political in the theatre. And in Red Scare on Sunset, Charles Busch proves that he can make a point as well as a joke and compromise neither.⁴⁸

Most critics agreed that, whatever its political agenda, Red Scare was funny. Even John Simon of New York, who had walked out on Vampire Lesbians, found much "sassy wit."⁴⁹ The cast was proclaimed to be the strongest Theatre-in-Limbo had yet assembled. And if some reviewers quibbled with Busch as playwright, they raved about his performance. Julie Halston was also deservedly singled out for praise. Elliott's direction was applauded, along with Whitehill's set and Tennenbaum's costumes.

The disappointing news, however, was that the New York Times review was mixed. Mel Gussow, whom Elliott felt was not well-disposed towards Busch, was sent to cover the show, rather than Frank Rich, who had given Lady such a rave.⁵⁰ Gussow found that "Mr. Busch is over his head and fuzzy-minded as a political theorist, but the play's brambled path is strewn with quirky comedy."⁵¹ To make matters worse, the review was placed in the Wednesday edition "Theatre in Review," a new format in which several plays were reviewed together, which meant that each play was given less space.

Gussow's lukewarm notice had little effect on the healthy ticket sales, and the run was extended for another week, closing on 5 May. Elliott had been trying to get

Alan Perry and Hal Luftig of the Orpheum Theatre interested in a commercial run, but they finally declined. Lady had, after all, lost its entire investment, and Red Scare, with its provocative ending, seemed an even riskier financial proposition. Eventually Kyle Renick pulled out as co-producer.⁵² Elliott spent several months finding investors, and Red Scare finally opened at the Lucille Lortel Theatre on 21 June with Manny Kladitis, Drew Dennett, and Shaun Huttar listed in the playbill as co-producers.⁵³

The Lortel Red Scare contained minimal changes from the WPA version; several lines were cut to tighten scenes, others were adjusted in order to point up a joke or sharpen a laugh. The opening went smoothly, but Red Scare soon found itself in financial trouble. At \$150,000, the production had been undercapitalized. By now, Elliott was convinced that a Limbo show attracted a limited audience which could only keep an Off-Broadway production running for up to five months of solid business, after which ticket sales would taper off.⁵⁴ Therefore, he budgeted Red Scare at \$100,000 less than Lady, hoping to recoup the investment quickly.

The problem was that two months had passed since the reviews of the WPA production had appeared. Press agent Sam Rudy voiced his concern during the WPA run:

I was saying, this show has enough publicity, it shouldn't have any more if it is going to transfer. A lot of producers want to see everything as soon as you can get it, but there is a limit, more or less, for what a show is going to get in its lifetime.⁵⁵

By the time Red Scare opened at the Lucille Lortel, it had come perilously close to its publicity limit. Articles and interviews had already appeared, and many critics had

reviewed the play at the WPA. As Rudy feared, it was difficult to generate excitement in the press.

There was about a \$30,000 reserve at the time of Red Scare's opening, but that simply wasn't enough for a effective publicity campaign. Other than the four paragraphs written by Gussow, the Times made no mention of the play, and as Elliott observed:

You need that attention from the Times. It's hard enough anyway. That doesn't guarantee success, but it, at least, gives you that jump start that you need. Without it, you're just flailing around trying to get an audience. The New York Times tells the bulk of the theatre-going public what to see.⁵⁶

As they had done in the past, Elliott and Busch waved their royalties, but it hardly remedied the situation.

By the third week of the run, Ben Sprecher, general manager of the Lucille Lortel Theatre, came to Elliott with a proposition; he would make whatever accommodations were necessary to help keep the show running, even if it meant offering a reduced rent, but Red Scare must vacate by 15 September, when a new play, The Baby Dance, wanted to open. At first, Elliott said no, hoping that business would pick up and they could retain the option of staying past September. But when the following week proved to be financially disastrous, Elliott gave up and accepted Sprecher's proposal. Red Scare got a reduced theatre rental, and announced a limited run, ending on 15 September. Even so, a closing notice went up, and the cast was never quite sure if it would make it through September.

During Red Scare's three month run, there was far less backstage trauma than there had been in Psycho Beach Party and Lady. If tension developed, it was due, in large part, to how the company reacted to Julie Halston's sudden success, both in Red

Scare and her new one-woman comedy act, I'll Be the Judge of That, and how Halston herself dealt with it.

Halston had received great affirmation from critics and public alike for her work in Red Scare. Her comedy act was even more of a hit. Howard Kissel of the Daily News called it "giddy transcendence," and I'll Be the Judge of That was extended at Eighty-Eights throughout the summer with plans to move it Off-Broadway.⁵⁷ Halston's success seemed to arouse very little jealousy among her fellow cast members, even though actors' egos can be fragile. But the company did resent her behavior, when she appeared to place more importance on her one-woman show than on Red Scare. She was not careful about conserving energy, and as a result, her work began to suffer. One night she even collapsed during the hospital scene. Eventually, Halston learned to be more responsible to her audiences. By the time she played her one-woman show Off-Broadway, Julie Halston's Lifetime of Comedy in February, 1992, she had become a far more disciplined performer, but her work in Red Scare remained somewhat variable to the end.

Generally though, Red Scare was performed with the most consistency the company had yet achieved. The gradually deteriorating performances in Psycho Beach Party and Lady had taught Elliott to monitor a show more closely, and he often dropped by the theatre. The two month waiting period before the transfer had given the actors a chance to reflect upon their roles. They were now more confident in their work and revealed an added depth and subtlety in their characterizations. Buckley now exuded a menacing sexuality as Mitchell Drake; Halliday was more

vulnerable as Malcolm; Hansen gave a bravura mad scene; and Hamilton as Granny Lou showed a quiet conviction which was surprisingly moving.

As for Busch, he displayed an extraordinary ability to evaluate an audience and adjust his performance, which his years of solo work had helped him achieve. He exhibited an expert sense of timing and a powerful ability to assess the mood of the audience. His accuracy left little to chance, and a comparison with video tapes of earlier productions, confirms tremendous growth in this area.

He could sometimes play an audience like a conductor. A notable example was the interchange between Mary and R.G., where she voices her fears about the quality of her acting. Already discussed as a striking example of exposure, this moment also displayed Busch's ability to manipulate audience response. Sometimes audiences exhibited similarities to the cult crowd which attended the company's productions at the Limbo Lounge. They caught the camp humor, show business references, intertextual quotations, and the atmosphere was "electric and consuming."⁵⁸ These were "committed" audiences, sharing in the gay sensibility which underlay a Limbo performance.⁵⁹ However, as Esther Newton, in Mother Camp, notes, there could be certain disadvantages in playing a work like Red Scare to a predominantly gay audience. Because the audience was familiar with a camp sensibility and drag, it demanded a certain level of quality. This, of course, was a trait of any discriminating audience, but Newton points to the competitive edge that gay audiences brought in their participatory response to the performance, which the performer had to overcome.⁶⁰ During the run of Red Scare, certain audiences, predominantly gay, were noted to be raucous. There was no hostility involved; they

were simply out for a good time and wanted to laugh, but they could be difficult to control. Their expectation of a Limbo show was based on wild, outrageous humor, and that is what they wanted from Red Scare. Busch found playing to a crowd like this a challenge. For instance, in the opening of Act Two, when Mary confesses her marital problems to R.G., Busch burlesqued Mary's plight. When he delivered the line "I feel so small," his voice rose to a high, diminutive pitch, as he gestured with his thumb and forefinger, to illustrate just how small he felt.⁶¹ The audience laughed loudly. Yet moments later, the scene would abruptly turn serious, when he voiced his doubts about his image as an actor.

Busch needed to work gingerly with demonstrative audiences if he wanted them to accept this moment of seriousness. With particularly rowdy crowds, he would throw out bits, step on laughs, and pull the audience up short. Sometimes he would simply wait till they quieted down. Often, he would begin to play the scene differently, anticipating the transition several beats beforehand. Whatever strategy he used, the result was always a moment of palpable stillness in the audience after he said, "you can't call what I do acting."

Watching Busch work with the audience during the run of Red Scare confirmed that he had grown into a formidable performer in his seven-year tenure with Limbo. Certain critics and sections of the public might find his style not to their taste, but it was clear that in the arena he had chosen, his expertise was impressive.

Red Scare managed to play its entire limited run and closed, as scheduled, on 15 September. It gave one hundred performances and, like Lady, lost its entire investment. Plans to open it in San Francisco never materialized, and the company's

most adventurous work suffered the shortest commercial run of a Limbo play. Julie Halston was nominated for a Drama Desk Award, the only company member ever to be so honored.

Busch had wanted to perform in a more naturalistic manner. But Red Scare, unlike Lady, had little consistency in acting style. The dream was a paradigm of Red Scare's combination of approaches--one moment operatic, another knowing and campy, then quietly introspective. But Red Scare was still Limbo's most substantial work to date, one which saw Busch experiment with engrossing new variations on his approaches to drag and camp. Now, however, he saw drag hampering his growth as a performer. Another show with the company would lead to repetition. He felt he needed to break with Theatre-in-Limbo.

The evening after Red Scare closed, the company held a memorial service for Bobby Carey at the Provincetown Playhouse. Several company member gave eulogies, there was a videotape of past performances, edited by Andy Halliday, and friends reminisced. When they left the theatre where it had all begun six years ago, there were no plans for a new Limbo show.

NOTES

1. Neither Busch, Elliott, nor Rennick remembers the exact date of this phone call. No dates were found in their respective diaries and calendars. Lori Sherman, general manager of the WPA, believes that the opening night party of Grotesque Lovesongs (20 November 1990) was when Rennick decided to do the play. If this is the case, then Busch probably telephoned before the party, but after Rennick's return from the Soviet Union, which would place it in the first half of November. In any case, by the end of November, Busch had received a commitment from Rennick and began to write the play.
2. These developmental script sessions (4,10,12 December, 4,25 January) were extended meetings of several hours. The author began attending sessions beginning with 12 December. During this period, however, Busch and Elliott were frequently in contact by phone, and often had dinner together, during which time Godiva was, no doubt, discussed. The point is that they maintained a continual line of communication between them beyond the scheduled script conferences.
3. The author kept a diary from 12 December 1990 through 15 September 1991 (the closing night of Red Scare on Sunset at the Lucille Lortel Theatre). The diary covers pre-production meetings, rehearsals, sessions with the designers, and performances at the WPA and Lucille Lortel theatres.
4. Charles Busch, "Godiva Takes a Ride Scenario,1990" TMs [photocopy], property of author, New York City. An earlier, undated version of the "Godiva" scenario exists, with the original title of Godiva was a Lady. The plot flips back and forth between 1951 and a series of dream/fantasy sequences. But inclusion of this earlier draft would serve little purpose other than to overwhelm the reader with minutiae without maintaining relevance to Red Scare's final development.
5. Group Session (including Charles Busch, Elizabeth Katherine Carr, Kenneth Elliott, Vivian Leone, Brian Whitehill), interview by author, tape recording, 26 October 1991, New York City.
6. Charles Busch, "Lady Godiva Takes a Ride," (first draft, 1990), TMs [photocopy], 1A-13, property of author, New York City.
7. Kyle Rennick, interview, 9 April 1991.
8. Charles Busch, interview by author, 9 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.

9. All figures cited, unless otherwise noted, are taken from diary entry for 24 January 1991.
10. Whitehill and Leone had their first meeting with Elliott on 14 January.
11. Kyle Renick, interview, 9 April 1991. Budget figures estimated by Renick. At the time, a WPA production cost between \$80,000 and \$100,000 to mount. While Red Scare was certainly not the most expensive, it was still a very elaborate venture.
12. Ralph Buckley/Judith Hansen, interview by author, 3 May 1991, tape recording, New York City.
13. Brian Whitehill, interview by author, 26 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
14. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 10 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
15. Charles Busch, interview by author, 10 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
16. Charles Busch, " 'Mary's Dream,' (12 March 1991) insert to 'Red Scare on Sunset,' (WPA version, 1991), TMs, 2-4-54, property of author, New York City.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 2-4-57.
19. Ibid., 2-4-58
20. As usual, Whitehill had begun designing Red Scare without having read the play. His first production meeting with Elliott was 14 January 1991, a week before the script was completed in its final form.
21. Charles Busch, Red Scare on Sunset, (New York: Samuel French, 1991). The acting edition contains Whitehill's ground plan, as well as photographs of the beach house and office sets as produced at the Lucille Lortel Theatre.
22. Roy Cockrum/Mark Hamilton, interview by author, 31 March 1991, tape recording, New York City.
23. Ibid.
24. Andy Halliday, interview by author, 20 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.
25. Arnie Kolodner, interview by author, 2 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

26. Arnie Kolodner, interview by author, 14 April 1991, tape recording, New York City.
27. Charles Busch, interview by author, 12 November 1991, tape recording, New York City.
28. Charles Busch, interview by author, 1 October 1991, tape recording, New York City.
29. Busch was aware of this problem and after Red Scare moved to the Lucille Lortel, he wanted to conflate the Hospital and Felson studio scenes, in an effort to tighten the play. The Communists would end up in Mary's hospital room, and plot strands would be quickly tied up there. Although Elliott was intrigued by this idea, there was no money in the budget for extra rehearsals. If Red Scare had toured, the new hospital scene would probably have been written.
30. Charles Busch, "Red Scare on Sunset," (WPA version, 1991), 2-2-81.
31. Charles Busch, interview by author, 12 November 1991, tape recording, New York City.
32. Charles Busch, "Red Scare on Sunset," (WPA version, 1991), 2-2-81.
33. Don Wilmeth, The Language of American Popular Entertainment (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 35. The term was used in vaudeville and burlesque.
34. On 3 April, the audience was invited to stay after the performance and discuss their responses to the ending. Many of them encouraged Busch not to change it, but the final scene continued to discomfit the general playgoer.
35. Charles Busch, "Red Scare on Sunset," (WPA version, 1991), 2-2-82.
36. Ibid., 2-7-82
37. Ibid., 1-1-4.
38. Ibid., 1-3-20,21.
39. Ibid., 2-2-70.
40. Ibid., 1-3-18.
41. Ibid., 2-1-41.
42. Busch often said that this was one of his favorite moments in Red Scare, and he loved the challenge of making a particularly boisterous audience quiet.
43. Charles Busch, "Red Scare on Sunset," (WPA version, 1991), 1-5-36.

44. Red Scare's press opening was on 21 April 1991, a little over four weeks after the first preview.
45. Remy, "Red Scare on Sunset," Variety, 29 April 1991.
46. Clive Barnes, "Busch Twist on H'Wood Blacklist," New York Post, 25 April 1991; Jan Stuart, "An Era when more than the Lipstick was Red," New York Newsday, 22 April 1991.
47. Michael Feingold, "Heartland of Darkness," Village Voice, 30 April 1991.
48. Michael Paller, "AmBusch," Outweek, 15 May 1991.
49. John Simon, "Night Mandy," New York, 6 May 1991, 110.
50. Elliott was upset about this situation. Rich was covering a production at the Manhattan Theatre Club which conflicted with the press opening for Red Scare. Although Gussow usually covered the WPA productions, Elliott felt that if the WPA press agents had done research about who was slated to review the show, there would have been time to change the press opening, making it possible for Rich to come, if he so desired. There could, however, be no guarantee of this.
51. Mel Gussow, "Theatre in Review," New York Times, 24 April 1991.
52. The explanation given at the time for Renick's withdrawal was that Busch and Elliott wanted to use their own press agent, Sam Rudy, rather than the WPA's Jeffrey Richards. Elliott later observed that another reason was probably that Renick could not get the necessary capital.
53. Drew Dennett was the largest single investor, according to Elliott. Also listed in the playbill were Michael Cohen, Bill Repicci and Lyle Saunders as associate producers. Duties of General Manager were taken on by Manny Kladitis of Niko Associates, Inc. Elliott worked, unsalaried, out of Kladitis's office for the Lortel run.
54. Kenneth Elliott, interview by author, 12 September 1991, tape recording, New York City. This interview was conducted three days before Red Scare closed at the Lortel. Elliott noted:

It isn't a show that appeals to everybody. I think it's very limited, really. Because of the drag, because of the gay aspect of it.
55. Sam Rudy, interview by author, 18 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.
56. Ibid.
57. Howard Kissel, "What the Topsy Stork Brought in," Daily News, 30 July 1991.

58. Esther Newton, Mother Camp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 63-64. Newton is speaking of the atmosphere in a gay bar when a drag performer is doing a successful show. The cult audience at a Limbo performances exhibits similar characteristics to those Newton describes.

59. Charles Keil, Urban Blues (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); cited in Esther Newton, Mother Camp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 63. Keil uses this concept of the committed audience for his examination of Blacks and blues singers. He makes a distinction between this and an appreciative but non-participatory audience.

60. Ibid.

61. Charles Busch, "Red Scare on Sunset," (Orpheum version, 1991), TMs, 2-1-40, property of author, New York City.

CONCLUSION

Several months after Red Scare on Sunset closed, Julie Halston reflected on the company's future:

Frankly, if Theatre-in-Limbo never did another production again, I wouldn't be surprised. I think there is a sense from a number of people that it is time to move on.¹

Arnie Kolodner agreed with Halston that, after seven years, company members were eager for new challenges, but was more optimistic about the possibility of another Limbo production:

We always thought Lady would be the end too. We all went on to do other things, but these projects didn't work out and now we are back together [in Red Scare]. So it is just like the beginning [at the Limbo Lounge] when people weren't doing much and said, let's get together and do something. That really is the impetus and it has been from the beginning.²

In fact, Red Scare was not the end of Theatre-in-Limbo. Although the company produced no new work in the next two years, several revivals were mounted for limited runs. In November 1991, while Halston was enjoying her Off-Broadway triumph in Julie Halston's Lifetime of Comedy, the company reunited for Times Square Angel at Theatre for The New City.³ Busch reverted to the earlier Limbo Lounge version and added two rather fey angels (played by Brian Winkowski and Guya Clark) for Albert's scenes in Heaven. Joining the original Limbo Lounge ensemble were Jim Borstelmann in Bobby Carey's role and Jim Mahady, substituting for Halliday, who was busy with his own play, I Can't Stop Screaming.⁴ Times

Square Angel was given a strong production and ran from 29 November through 15 December.

The following February, the company traveled to Tokyo, where they were invited to perform a three week engagement of Vampire Lesbians, which was taped for Japanese television. Along with Busch, the cast included Theresa Aceves (she had recently dropped her stage name, "Marlowe"), Tom Aulino, Roy Cockrum, Arnie Kolodner, Andy Halliday, Becky London, and Martin Outzen (in the role originated by Bobby Carey). The production's reception was predictable; polite puzzlement at the verbal word-play and the camp sensibility, which the average Japanese theatre-goer could hardly be expected to appreciate, but a decidedly more enthusiastic response to the physical clowning. Curiously, Busch found that his biggest fans were teenage girls, who showered him with bouquets of flowers during curtain calls and flocked to the stage door to catch a glimpse of him after the show.

In December 1992, the company returned to Theatre for The New City with Times Square Angel. Cheryl Reeves replaced Yvonne Singh, and, in a role created specifically for him, Andy Halliday played Helen, an over-the-hill nightclub singer. This has been the most recent Limbo production to date (May 1993).

Between 1984 and 1991, Theatre-in-Limbo produced eight new plays. The texts can be separated into three categories: sketch comedy (Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, Coma, or Sleeping Beauty); historical costume parody (Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium, Pardon My Inquisition); and film genre parody (Times Square Angel, Psycho Beach Party, The Lady in Question, Red Scare on Sunset). In performance, however, all share several qualities in common: 1) camp treatment of material; 2)

characterization inspired by the performer's personality rather than the given circumstances found in the text; 3) the metatheatrical conceit of a stock company of players presenting the work; 4) a celebration of cheap theatrical devices; 5) gender play through the use of drag--female impersonation only.

This study has examined these productions traits in each play, and has shown that the later pieces, the film genre parodies, contain the company's most sustained and imaginative work. These recent efforts display an increasing ability to exploit the potential of drag, coupled with an ambition to go beyond mere entertainment.

Although the final production under consideration, Red Scare on Sunset, did not fully achieve the goals of its creators, artistically or commercially, this was revealed to be caused by the play's ambivalent position between costume extravaganza and political satire, never fully resolved, and Busch's conflicts as actor/playwright and entertainer. But the play however problematic, represents a new departure for the company, in that it attempts to address issues of a more serious nature. Moreover, the production contained some of the most accomplished performance and design elements which Limbo has yet produced.

This study contends that Theatre-in-Limbo has introduced drag to a wider audience by successfully crossing over into mainstream commercial theatre.⁵

Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, for example, was shown to attract a sizeable number of tourists, many of whom had probably never seen a drag performance before. Partly as a result of Limbo's unthreatening presentation of drag, other examples of cross-dressing in legitimate plays have since appeared with growing frequency on the New York stage. The musical Ruthless featured a cross-dressed performance and was an

Off-Broadway hit in 1992.⁶ Pageant, another Off-Broadway hit running at the same time as Red Scare, featured a cast of beauty contestants, all played by men. In his years of Off-Broadway performances, Busch had helped to validate drag as a legitimate performance style to the commercial New York theatre public.

This study also asserts that Theatre-in-Limbo was able to address the mainstream theatre-going public more effectively than the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. This was due, in part, to the differing agendas of the two companies. In 1967, when the Ridiculous Theatrical Company produced its first play, Big Hotel, two years before the Stonewall Rebellion and the Gay Liberation movement, the gay sensibility was still a closet sensibility. Everett Quinton, now artistic director of the company, states that "the Ridiculous Theatrical Company was born out of a reaction to oppression."⁷ For Ludlam, camp was "motivated by rage," and his work was filled with anger and ridicule filtered through a singular talent, which shaped it into provocative, often fascinating theatre.⁸ In comparison, anger and discontent had little to do with the birth of Theatre-in-Limbo. There was no goal other than amusement, for and between the actors as well as the audience.

These contrasting stimuli had profound ramifications for the future of both companies. For Ludlam, drag was a mode of confrontation, for Busch it was a means to entertain. Busch's drag was glamorous as well as comic, avoiding the grotesque aspects that Ludlam seemed to revel in. Busch's more accessible approach can be illustrated by comparing his method of exposure with that of Ludlam's.

Oscar Montero, in "Lipstick Vogue: the Politics of Drag," observes:

A drag show does not please because a man perfectly or imperfectly represents a woman, but because performer and audience are both aware of an explicit or

implicit contrast between two systems or signs, femininity and masculinity, and in that awareness resides the playfulness of recognizing the failure of the attempt at representation, parodic or serious as the case might be.⁹

Ludlam's telltale signs of masculinity were more blatant than Busch's. While Ludlam revealed his hairy chest in Camille, Busch exposed his buttocks in Vampires. The former choice was initially shocking, the latter only slyly provocative. Audiences could more easily re-enter the game of pretense with Busch.

Here are two examples of how Ludlam and Busch used their bodies to suggest femaleness, which demonstrate audience accessibility or lack of it. Busch, as a teenage girl in Psycho Beach Party (1987), drops his halter to reveal his hairless chest and bemoan the flatness of his breasts. In Salammbô (1985), Ludlam performs a veil dance. At the climax, he exits to remove the final veil. A female double returns with her face and torso hidden by another veil; she exposes her obviously female crotch to the audience and runs offstage. Rather than the funny and poignant moment Busch creates, Ludlam's coup de théâtre is startling and, for some mainstream audiences, alarming. Although the Salammbô sequence cannot be called genuine drag, it remains a brilliant example of exposure. But Busch's is again more accessible to a mainstream audience: a bare chest is more allowable on the stage than an exposed crotch, male or female.

Again using Ludlam's work for comparison purposes, Limbo's accessibility can be seen in the plays themselves. Although Ludlam often used film genres as source material (Big Hotel, Hot Ice, The Artificial Jungle), he did not so much parody a genre as deconstruct it, using the form for satirical purposes, combined with allusions to theatrical literature as well as popular culture: The Artificial Jungle owed

as much to Zola's Thérèse Requin as to film noir. But general theatre audiences could easily lose or misunderstand Ludlam's dizzying array of references. For example, many audiences attending Bluebeard were no doubt unaware that the play's final line ("Come, let us do the best we can to change the opinion of this unhappy man,") alludes to The Misanthrope.¹⁰ In contrast, Busch limited his source material to popular culture. Even if straight audiences were bewildered by some of the camp references appreciated by gay audiences, the former were aware of the parodic elements because the source material (film) is a major component of popular culture. In the pieces based on sketch comedy and historical costume dramas, Limbo relied on the comic potential of drag, underplaying its confrontational qualities. And because Busch's drag was less grotesque than Ludlam's, the conventions of gender and genre complimented each other more easily.

Theatre-in-Limbo's experimental style is to be found in performance rather than Busch's texts. The presence of drag created a subversive atmosphere which gave Psycho Beach Party a satiric slant on teenage sexual behavior in the 60s; The Lady in Question a skewed image of Nazi melodramas and well-made plays; and Red Scare on Sunset an ironic view of political radicalism and the Middle American value system.

In tracing the history of this company, this study has shown that if there was a common objective that bound its members together, it was the desire to infiltrate mainstream New York theatre. But competing in the commercial arena presented problems that the company could never truly overcome. The commercial success of Vampire Lesbians proved to be an anomaly. Production costs for the next three shows soared: the actors were now Equity; other unions became involved when the

company played Equity houses; weekly operating costs mounted; theatres with large audience capacities needed to be filled to meet the rent; and advertising budgets rose.¹¹ Perhaps the most crucial problem the company encountered was not of a financial nature. As a prospective member of mainstream culture, they could no longer observe and comment on it with the freedom they had previously enjoyed. They now had to participate in the same culture they had been parodying as outsiders. In order for them to do this, camp and its underlying gay sensibility needed to be reinscribed into a less exclusive language. Moreover, the act of drag was still an unsettling experience for some theatre-goers. Even though Limbo had presented drag in a congenial manner that found approval with many straight audiences, a significant number still resisted it. The features which brought Busch and his company to public attention finally excluded them from general acceptance; after Vampire Lesbians, ensuing Limbo productions had progressively shorter runs.

Although the individual members of the company did not share a common aesthetic, one of the most notable accomplishments of Theatre-in-Limbo was that its productions achieved such cohesiveness with a group of collaborators whose tastes were so dissimilar. Busch had an affinity for drag performance and camp humor; Elliott disliked both; Whitehill was a graphic artist with little interest in the naturalistic elements that Busch's parodies seemed to demand; the actors were a mixed bag of enthusiasm, inexperience, and seasoned professionalism. Yet in combination, these individuals managed to create plays in which their contributions fit together and complimented each other.

Predictably, as members grew in skill and confidence, the need to go off on their own increased as well. As the median age of the "core" group approached forty, the desire to make names for themselves outside of Limbo became even more insistent. Busch himself has decided to leave the confinements of Limbo and drag. His new play, A Name for Himself (1993), features a male role which he intends to play.¹²

As the company's needs have changed, perhaps reactions to drag and camp have altered, as well. By 1993, AIDS and the political climate of gay activism have exerted a great influence on the gay sensibility. As Marjorie Garber notes, in Vested Interests, "the recent wave of homophobic sentiment connected with the AIDS epidemic prompted some gay activists to urge sartorial and behavioral caution."¹³ This impulse towards restraint is also reflected in theatrical presentations. In addition, there is a tendency in the gay community to perceive drag and camp as a hold-over from the pre-Stonewall closet era. Journalists and critics appear anxious to re-evaluate drag and camp in a "politically correct" context, or at least endow them with utilitarian attributes.¹⁴ Although there is still audience support for Theatre-in-Limbo, as evidenced by the response to the revivals of Times Square Angel, this changing attitude toward drag/camp seems likely affect the company's future audiences. The amusing innocence and frivolity exhibited in a production like Lady may no longer be as warmly appreciated as it was in 1989.

Perhaps younger audiences have grown more discriminating about drag performance, as well: they now demand more from cross-dressing than simple entertainment. The author was present at a variety of drag performances in New

York during the past two years (1991-1993). Belle Reprieve (1991) and Sarrasine (1991) were two recent works that used drag (male and female) in highly original ways.¹⁵ The audiences were observed to be young (20s and 30s) and enthusiastic. Yet when the British gay troupe Bloopies (an all male cast in drag) came to New York with Get Hur (1993), a more traditional drag vaudeville, the audience was noticeably older and less responsive.¹⁶

Busch surely sensed this changing attitude in 1991 when he wrote Red Scare on Sunset. The play's irony was deeper, the camp more subdued than his previous efforts. The result was a flawed but intriguing evening in the theatre. The question arises whether Busch will abandon Theatre-in-Limbo and its drag melodramas. The company has reached a point where it is beginning to produce remarkable works. The mixture of humor, camp, cheap theatrics, and committed clowning not only entertain, but have now begun to reveal more profound insights, as well. There is far more exploration of gender and cultural constructions to be done through the imaginative use of drag and camp humor. The author hopes that this study has not chronicled the final chapter in Limbo's story, but that Busch and his company will appear before long in a new work that takes even greater advantage of Limbo's ability to amuse and provoke, while it reclaims and finds new value in the debris of popular culture.

NOTES

1. Julie Halston, interview by author, 30 December 1991, tape recording, New York City.

2. Arnie Kolodner, interview by author, 2 August 1991, tape recording, New York City.

3. According to press agent, Sam Rudy, one of the reasons for mounting Times Square Angel was to pay back \$1500 that was owed the Shirley Herz office for Red Scare out-of-pocket expenses.

4. I Can't Stop Screaming was given an Equity Showcase production during December 1991. Robert Simonson (Theatre Week, 23 December 1991) observed:

I can't say much for Screaming as a play. The work's structure is all over the place, randomly constructed as to best mine Hollywood lore for its vast camp potential . . . the play's scant pleasures are derived then, from the performances: the most satisfying being (predictably) Halliday's, without which the show need not exist.

5. The crossover of drag performance is addressed in the following articles: "Crossover Success in New York's Downtown Gay Theater Scene," Advocate, 13 May 1986; Christopher Vaughn, "Comedy is a Drag," Hollywood Reporter, 11 November 1986; Marshall Fine, "Blurring the Line," Westchester Gannet Newspapers, 27 August 1989; Jeffrey Essman, "Big Wigs in the Mainstream," TheatreWeek, 23 April 1990; David Patrick Stearns, "Their Style Has Come into Fashion," USA Today, 14 August 1991; Herbert Muschamp, "Vogue Arts: Performance," Vogue, December 1991.

6. Stephen Holden, review of Ruthless by Joel Paley, New York Times, 13 May 1992. Holden notes that the play "belongs to a theatrical genre exemplified by the comedies of Charles Busch, in which almost everything has a show business reference." Joel Vig originated the role of Sylvia St. Croix, a talent agent. He was later replaced by Sylvia Miles. Note that by 1992, Holden was calling Busch's parodies of genres a distinct genre itself.

7. Everett Quinton, interview by author, 1 April 1992, tape recording, New York City.

8. Charles Ludlam, The Scourge of Human Folly: The Essays and Opinions of Charles Ludlam (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992), 254.
9. Oscar Montero, "Lipstick Vogue: the Politics of Drag," Radical America 22 (January-February 1989): 41.
10. Charles Ludlam, Bluebeard (New York: Samuel French, 1971), 50. Molière, The Misanthrope, trans. Richard Wilbur (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1954). Here is Wilbur's translation:

Come, Madame, let's do everything we can
To change the mind of this unhappy man. (152)
11. To date, the Ridiculous Theatrical Company still maintains a non-Equity company.
12. In this play, the leading character is a gay electrolysist living in Greenwich Village. Other roles were not written with Limbo actors in mind. Manhattan Theatre Club hosted an in-house reading on 2 October 1992, but there were no immediate plans to produce it.
13. Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Routledge, 1992), 140.
14. See Jeffrey Hilbert, "The Politics of Drag," Advocate, 23 April 1991; David Román, "'It's My Party and I'll Die If I Want To!': Gay Men, AIDS, and the Circulation of Camp in U.S. Theatre," Theatre Journal 44 (October 1992): 305-327.
15. Belle Reprieve was devised and performed by Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw of Split Britches and Bette Bourne and Precious Pearl of Blooplips. The piece was a gender re-constructed treatment of characters from A Streetcar Named Desire. It played 14-31 March 1991 at 232 West Broadway, and later at La MaMa Club. The Gloria company production of Sarasine was written by Neil Bartlett (libretto) and Nicholas Bloomfield (music) and played at Dance Theatre Workshop 4-8 and 10-15 September 1991. The play was an adaptation of a Balzac story about a castrato who was portrayed onstage by two men and a woman.
16. Get Hur opened at Dance Theatre Workshop on 26 January 1993, closed on 7 February 1993, and then moved to Theatre for The New City. Blooplips was formed by Bette Bourne in 1977. Its style is a mixture of music hall and drag performance.

APPENDIX A

DRAMATIC WORKS BY CHARLES BUSCH.

(Entries in Chronological Order)

1975: Out-takes of a B-Movie (full-length play).1976: A Woman's Picture (full-length play).Travelogue (one-act play).Sister Act (one-act play).Old Coozies (one-act play).The Fall of the House of Evil, or Teethmarks! (full-length play).1977: Myrtle Pope, the Story of a Woman Possessed (one-act play).1978: Hollywood Confidential (solo piece).1979: Vagabond Vignettes: La Marquesa, That's Showbiz, People on a New York Bus (solo pieces).1980: A Theatrical Party (solo piece).1981: Welcome to Corona (solo piece).Before Our Mother's Eyes (one-act play).1982: Blind Item (screen play).Escape From Camp Kitchiawamee (solo piece).Chile Pepper (solo piece).After You've Gone (solo piece).1983: Phantom Lovers (solo piece).The Dream (solo piece).Après Moi, le Déluge (with Kenneth Elliott, solo piece).Reed (solo piece).1984: Benjamin Harrison High School (with Kenneth Elliott, full-length play).Farley and Suzanne (one-act play).Vampire Lesbians of Sodom (one-act play).Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium (one-act play).Sleeping Beauty, or Coma (one-act play, first version).

Gidget Goes Psychotic (one-act play, first version).
Times Square Angel (one-act play, Limbo Lounge version).

1985: Sleeping Beauty, or Coma (one-act play, second version).
Times Square Angel (full-length play, Off-Broadway version).

1986: Pardon My Inquisition (one-act play).
Gidget Goes Psychotic (one-act play, second version).
Lillian (television pilot).

1987: Psycho Beach Party (full-length play, Off-Broadway version).
Wolfe and Byrd (television pilot).
Ankles Aweigh! (musical libretto).
Vampire Lesbians of Sodom (screenplay).

1989: The Lady in Question (full-length play).
A Star Hath Been Born (television pilot).
All About Me (one-act play).

1990: Two in a Million (television pilot).

1991: House of Flowers (musical libretto).
Red Scare on Sunset (full-length play).

1992: Miss Divina (full-length play).
A Name for Himself (full-length play).

APPENDIX B

THEATRE-IN-LIMBO NEW YORK PRODUCTIONS.
(Original Casts, Information on Runs)
(Entries in Chronological Order)

Vampire Lesbians of Sodom: Limbo Lounge
(Cast in order of appearance)

Ali, a guard	Robert Carey
Hujar, a guard	Aaron Cole (Arnie Kolodner)
A Virgin Sacrifice	Charles Busch
The Succubus, a monster	Lola Pashalinski*
King Carlyle, a silent movie idol	Kenneth Elliott
Etienne, a butler	Andy Hallday
Renee Vain, a starlet	Theresa Aceves
La Condesa, a silent screen vamp	Lola Pashalinski
Madeleine Astarte, a stage actress	Charles Busch
Oatsie Carewe, a gossip columnist	Tom Aulino
Zack, a chorus boy	Aaron Cole (Arnie Kolodner)
P.J., a chorus boy	Robert Carey
Danny, a chorus boy	Andy Halliday

Opens: 6 April 1984, old Limbo Lounge. Closes: 22 June 1984. Total run: 5 performances.

Re-opens at new Limbo Lounge: 4 October. Closes: 1 December 1984. Total run: 11 performances.

Re-opens: 22-31 March 1985. Total run: 5 performances.

*Lola Pashalinski replaced by Julie Halston on 18 May 1984.

Theodora: She-Bitch of Byzantium: Limbo Lounge
(Cast in order of appearance)

Rita, a handmaiden	Theresa Aceves
Tosa, a temple dancer	Andy Halliday
The Emperor Justinian	Kenneth Elliott
Aunt Vulva, his royal aunt	Julie Halston*
The Empress Theodora	Charles Busch
Andreas	Aaron Cole (Arnie Kolodner)
Marcus	Robert Carey
Fata Morgana, a gypsy queen	Tom Aulino

Opens: 8 June 1984, old Limbo Lounge. Closes 30 June: 4 performances. Total run: 4 performances.

Opens at new Limbo Lounge on 25 October 1984.

Closes 2 December 1984: 15 performances. Total run: 15 performances.

*Julie Halston replaced by Randi Klein at new Limbo Lounge.

Times Square Angel: Limbo Lounge
(Cast in order of appearance)

Albert, an angel	Arnie Kolodner
Milton Keisler	Kenneth Elliott
Georgie	Robert Carey
Irish O'Flanagan	Charles Busch
Peona	Yvonne Singh
Eddie	Andy Halliday
Chick LaFountain	Ralph Buckley
Valerie Waverly	Theresa Aceves
Old Mag	Kenneth Elliott
Agnes	Theresa Aceves

Opens: 6 December 1984. Closes 30 December 1984. Total run: 16 performances.

Sleeping Beauty, or Coma: Limbo Lounge
(Cast in order of appearance)

Miss Thicke Andy Halliday
 Enid Wetwhistle Meghan Robinson
 Sebastian Loré Kenneth Elliott
 Fauna Alexander Charles Busch
 Ian McKenzie Tom Aulino
 Anthea Arlo Theresa Aceves
 Barry Posner Robert Carey*
 Craig Prince Arnie Kolodner

Opens: 4 May 1985. Closes: 19 May 1985. Total run: 8 performances.

*Edward Taussig replaces Robert Carey for several performances.

Sleeping Beauty, or Coma: Off-Broadway
(Cast in order of appearance)

Miss Thicke Andy Halliday
 Enid Wetwhistle Meghan Robinson
 Sebastian Loré Kenneth Elliott
 Fauna Alexander Charles Busch
 Ian McKenzie Tom Aulino
 Anthea Arlo Theresa Marlowe
 Barry Posner Robert Carey
 Craig Prince Arnie Kolodner

Vampire Lesbians of Sodom: Off Broadway
(Cast in order of appearance)

Ali, a guard Robert Carey
 Hujar, a guard Arnie Kolodner
 A virgin sacrifice Charles Busch
 The Succubus, a monster Meghan Robinson
 King Carlisle, a silent movie idol Kenneth Elliott
 Etienne, a butler Andy Halliday
 Renee Vain, a starlet Theresa Marlowe
 La Condesa, a silent screen vamp Meghan Robinson
 Madeleine Astarté Charles Busch

Oatsie Carewe Tom Aulino
Zack, a chorus boy Arnie Kolodner
P.J, a chorus boy. Robert Carey
Danny, a chorus boy Andy Halliday
Tracy, an aspiring singer Theresa Marlowe

Opens: 19 June 1985. Closes: 27 May 1990.

Total run: 17 previews, 2,024 performances.

Times Square Angel: Off-Broadway
(Cast in order of appearance)

Eddie Andy Halliday

Johnny the Noodle Robert Carey

Reporter Tom Aulino

Abe Kesselman Arnie Kolodner

Serita Yvonne Singh

Irish O'Flanagan Charles Busch

Miss Ellerbee Meghan Robinson

Duke O'Flanagan Ralph Buckley

Mrs. Tooley Julie Halston

Cookie Gibbs Theresa Marlowe

Olive Sanborn Meghan Robinson

Dexter Paine III Michael Belanger

Mrs. Paine Tom Aulino

Stella Julie Halston

Albert, an angel Arnie Kolodner

Voice of the Lord James Cahill

Milton Keisler Tom Aulino

Georgie Robert Carey

Peona Yvonne Singh

Chick LaFountain Ralph Buckley
Valerie Waverly Theresa Marlowe
Old Mag Meghan Robinson
Agnes Tom Aulino

Opens: 11 December 1985. Closes: 9 February 1986.
Total run: 8 previews, 28 performances.

Pardon My Inquisition: Limbo Lounge
(Cast in order of appearance)

Bruno	Ralph Buckley
Manuel	Michael Belanger
Topo	Michael Leitheed
Pepe	Robert Carey
Estrelita	Randi Klein
Zulima	Yvonne Singh
Vincenzo	Andy Halliday
Don Arturo	Arnie Kolodner
Maria Garbonza	Charles Busch
La Marquesa Del Drago	Charles Busch
The Marquis	Tom Aulino
Rosa	Becky London
Cardinal Ximenes	Ralph Buckley
Prudencia	Becky London
Aleandro	Michael Belanger
Beggar Woman	Becky London
Señora Gonzales	Andy Halliday

Opens: 16 May 1986. Closes: 7 June 1986.
Total run: 9 performances.

Gidget Goes Psychotic: Limbo Lounge
(Cast in order of appearance)

Stinky Robert Carey

Dee Dee Lanette Hohl

Nicky Michael Leitheed

Provoloney Andy Halliday

Moondoggie Arnie Kolodner

Gidget Charles Busch

Kahoona Ralph Buckley

Marvel Ann Michael Belanger

Larue Becky London

Mrs. Forrest Meghan Robinson

Bettina Barnes Theresa Marlowe

Opens: 10 October 1986. Closes: 26 October 1986. Total run: 9 performances.

Psycho Beach Party: Off-Broadway
(Cast in order of appearance)

Yo Yo Robert Carey

Dee Dee Judith Hansen

Nicky Michael Leitheed

Provoloney Andy Halliday

Star Cat Arnie Kolodner

Chicklet Charles Busch

Kanaka Ralph Buckley

Berdine Becky London

Marvel Ann Michael Belanger

Mrs. Forrest Meghan Robinson

Bettina Barnes Theresa Marlowe

Opens: 20 June 1987. Closes: 15 May 1988. Total run: 16 previews, 344 performances

The Lady in Question: WPA Theatre and Off-Broadway
(Cast in order of appearance)

Voice of the Announcer James Cahill

Professor Mittelhoffer Mark Hamilton

Heidi Mittelhoffer Theresa Marlowe

Karel Freiser Robert Carey

Professor Erik Maxwell Arnie Kolodner

Hugo Hoffmann Andy Halliday

Baron Wilhelm Von Elsner Kenneth Elliott

Gertrude Garnet Charles Busch

Kitty, The Countess of de Borgia Julie Halston

Augusta Von Elsner Meghan Robinson

Dr. Maximilian Mark Hamilton

Lotte Von Elsner Andy Halliday

Raina Aldric Meghan Robinson

WPA run. Opens: 18 November 1988. Closes: 11 December 1988. Total run: 16 performances.

Off-Broadway run. Opens: 14 July 1989. Closes: 3 December 1989. Total run: 14 previews, 151 performances.

Red Scare on Sunset: WPA and Off-Broadway
(Cast in order of appearance)

Ralph Barnes	Mark Hamilton
Jerry	Roy Cockrum
Pat Pilford	Julie Halston
Frank Taggart	Arnie Kolodner
Mary Dale	Charles Busch
Malcolm	Andy Halliday
Marta Towers	Judith Hansen
Salesgirl	Mark Hamilton
Mitchell Drake	Ralph Buckley
Bertram Barker	Roy Cockrum
R.G. Benson	Mark Hamilton
Granny Lou	Mark Hamilton
Old Lady	Andy Halliday

WPA run. Opens: 19 March 1991. Closes: 5 May 1991. Total run: 49 performances.

Off-Broadway run. Opens: 21 June 1991. Closes: 15 September 1991. Total run: 100 performances.

Times Square Angel: Theatre for The New City revivals
(Cast in order of appearance)

Angel 1	Guyah Clark
Albert, an angel	Arnie Kolodner
Angel 2	Brian Winkowski
Voice of the Lord	James Cahill
Milton Keisler	Kenneth Elliott
Georgie	Jim Borstelmann
Irish O'Flannagan	Charles Busch
Peona	Yvonne Singh*
Eddie	Jim Mahady
Chick LaFountain	Ralph Buckley
Valerie Waverly	Theresa Aceves
Mr. Ellerbee	Kenneth Elliott
Old Mag	Kenneth Elliott
Agnes	Theresa Aceves

1991 revival: Opens: 29 November 1991. Closes: 15 December 1991. Total run: 14 performances.

1992 revival: Opens: 3 December 1992. Closes: 20 December 1992. Total run: 15 performances.

*For 1992 revival: Yvonne Singh replaced by Cheryl Reeves; role of "Helen" added for Andy Halliday.

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