

Red Scare on Sunset

THE VILLAGE VOICE

Heartland of Darkness

By MICHAEL FEINGOLD

“It’s a marvelous script,” says ‘50s screen goddess Mary Dale about her upcoming flicker, based on the life of Lady Godiva. “Really illuminates those troubled times. And we have *terrific* musical number.” The abrupt slide from earnestness to naked glitz – a sort of elegant verbal pratfall, tossed off with glamorous wave of the hands – is only to be expected, since Mary Dale is the latest incarnation of actor/writer Charles Busch, the infinitely skilled amasser of more stage tricks for seeming adorable in a dress than any actress since Laurette Taylor pouted her way through *Peg o’ My Heart*. 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 Mary Dale is the prototypical 1940s Hollywood star who discovers that her husband is not, by the standards of the Cold War era, politically correct, and Busch’s play, unlike Mary’s screenplay, really does illuminate those troubled times.

Hollywood itself had trouble being glib about the Communist Enemy. Anti-commie movies were made in the late ‘40s and early ‘50s, but never coalesced into a genre: The studios weren’t eager to wave their own dirty linen in the public’s face, and, having avoided politics for the most of their lives, they had no cinema vocabulary for dramatizing it. (Many of the film artists bright enough to deal with such matters had, ironically, been blacklisted; in Hollywood, seriousness itself was a leftist tendency.) In the few such movies that were made – *My Son John*, *Red Menace*, *The Woman on Pier 13* – belief in communism seemed little like spying, a little like drug addiction, and a little like joining the Mafia.

Busch uses elements from all these films (as well as Hollywood-scandal flicks of the era like *A Star Is Born*), but adulterates them with Hollywood history, rightly expecting his audience to know the reality better than the genre. The communist-front organization into which Mary’s husband-with-a-past is lured is a Method-acting studio; the director of her current picture shows his leftward tilt by having neorealist ambitions, like the desire to photograph stars without filters.

While the lefties get railroaded out of their civil rights by loud-mouthed right-wingers, Busch doesn’t hesitate to show the left preparing to pull exactly the same stunt if and when it comes to power. Homosexuality, represented by Mary’s butler Malcolm, is accurately shown not only as a bugbear of both left and right, but as a source of blank incomprehension to the willed innocence at America’s center. “He

lived with such sorrow all his life,” says Mary after Malcolm is hounded to death, “existing in that bizarre lonely netherworld of half-men.”

Since the speaker is a man in a female role, this is of course a joke, one of many which the delicacy of Busch’s drag playing enables him to make, but its bland absoluteness masks a genuine terror.

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 gals-to-the-rescue, in the chilling last scene of *Red Scare on Sunset* it’s simple, goodhearted, well-meaning Mary Dale, with all her Middle American virtues, who turns out to be the horror at the core of the piece.

This gives an extra bite to the hilarious dream sequence in which Mary, bopped on the bean by a communist menace, gets Lady Godiva’s heroism muddled with her own down-home family saga, and Busch gets to show us how the oversimplified values Hollywood carefully drilled into the American brain were only echoes of those the American heart was already transmitting. 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.

Not everything in *Red Scare on Sunset* is as powerful as this piece of sheer devastating scare, but between wit, spoof, irony, parody, and strokes of straightforward playwriting, Busch has come up with his richest mix of material to date, while Kenneth Elliott’s production moves you smoothly past both the shifts in tone and occasional dips in the action. If not everyone in the cast has Busch’s infinite comic resource, performers like Julie Halston and Mark Hamilton bring a romping energy or inventiveness of their own, while B.T. Whitehill’s ability to cram enough locations for half a dozen films onto the WPA’s small stage suggests an infinitude of resource even beyond Busch’s.