

Reviews

Flipping My Wig

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Between a Female Image and Fantasy!

By BEN BRANTLEY

“Once Upon a Mattress” isn’t the only revisionist fairy tale being told on a New York stage these days. Down at the WPA Theater you can experience the sordid but uplifting personal history of a not-so-very-wicked stepmother who only wanted to do right by her family and get a little glamour out of life.

Even (or perhaps especially) noble, divinely dressed women in ankle-strap evening shoes must suffer, and this virtuous fashion plate is undone by her stepdaughter, Ella, a deeply disturbed young woman who insists on wearing rags and conducting obscene dialogues with an imaginary fairy godmother.

When Ella throws that shaker of martinis in her stepmother’s face, something snaps. And now the whole nasty story is being told beneath the surprisingly flattering glow of an interrogation lamp in a police station. “Yes, I killed my stepdaughter,” the woman confesses, with contorted brow. “And I’d do it again.”

This conflation of “Cinderella” and “Mildred Pierce,” the 1945 Joan Crawford weeper, is the work of Charles Busch, who is practicing his own delightful brand of theater witchcraft in “Flipping My Wig,” the one-er-person show that opened last night, directed by Kenneth Elliott. What’s remarkable here is that Mr. Busch isn’t really doing Crawford. Anyone with a modest gift for mimicry and a set of shoulder pads can achieve that.

No, Mr. Busch is less intent on becoming an animated glossy studio portrait than evoking the sensibility of an entire genre of movies and an acting technique that goes beyond heavy lipstick and penciled eyebrows. The politically correct term for his profession is not, he states, none too seriously, “female impersonator” but “gender illusionist.”

Many professional drag queens are, however, only impersonators. Mr. Busch is indeed an illusionist and of a particularly affecting stripe. Here, in his assorted incarnations – from a tough but good-hearted nightclub chanteuse of the Prohibition era to a suburban housewife who becomes Edith Piaf for an evening – he provides a living bridge between manufactured images of womanhood and the fantasies they inspire.

Mr. Busch, a popular crossover cross-dresser since his first hit spoof, “Vampire Lesbians of Sodom,” a decade ago, holds a special place in the world of drag. Walking a delicate line between adulation and ridicule, he avoids both the polemics and the pathos of most men who play women.

In doing so, he speaks to anyone who is willing to be seduced by the sublime and ridiculous myths of old-style stardom, who has daydreams of life as a series of flattering close-ups with soul-wrenching

music in the background. Mr. Busch is a bona fide deconstructionist, all right, but free of any chilly, objectifying distance.

“Wig,” in which the actor is marvelously abetted by the pianist and composer Dick Gallagher, the show’s musical director, is couched in the much overworked form of confessional performance art. While the red-wigged Mr. Busch, who looks like Arlene Dahl crossed with the child star Freddie Bartholomew, does provide autobiographical details (he had memorized Ida Lupino’s entire filmography by the age of nine), there is thankfully little in the way of soul-baring grit.

Instead, the anecdotes illuminate a continuing love affair with the imperial gestures and postures that real life seldom allows. Watch Mr. Busch, as a schoolboy infatuated with Audrey Hepburn, telling his teacher, “I couldn’t possibly hand in my book report today, because I found ‘The Call of the Wild’ too dreary for words.” The voice isn’t Hepburn but the inflections are, and they bring a delicious spark of wish fulfillment to a humdrum encounter.

The evening has an erratic variety of songs, from egregiously rhymed patter numbers (about subjects like cosmetic surgery and growing stale in show business) of the sort Mae West used to perform to a smutty Bessie Smith-style ballad about a cable repairman. But the production has the polish and fluidity of a cabaret act by a pro as seasoned as Julie Wilson.

Mr. Busch is terrific as Sarah Bernhardt (playing “The Empress Theodora”) and especially the mostly forgotten Gladys George, who specialized in worldly, hard-bitten roles. He says he does drag out of the desire to “be fabulous.”

But he also knows that this kind of fabulousness is less about dresses and makeup than the small, telling detail that immediately evokes a whole, charmingly deluded sensibility in which life is a series of grand entrances and heart-stopping exit lines.

“Susan Hayward could do wonders with her lower lip,” he says. Mr. Busch can, too. But don’t discount the effectiveness of a single crooked finger, sidelong glance or evaporating smile. As the demented Norma Desmond points out in “Sunset Boulevard,” it takes only “one look” to conjure up a star. Mr. Busch is a master of such shorthand.

FLIPPING MY WIG

Written and performed by Charles Busch; directed by Kenneth Elliott; musical direction by Dick Gallagher; set by B.T. Whitehill; lighting by Michael Lincoln; wigs by Elizabeth Katherine Carr; costumes by Robert Legere; sound by John Kilgore; production stage manager, Christina Massie. Presented by the WPA Theater; Kyle Renick, artistic director; Lori Sherman, managing director. At 519 West 23rd Street, Chelsea.
