

Psycho Beach Party

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Sand Blast

By LAURIE STONE

Drag performer Danny LaRue's London theater is lined with pictures of the star out of costume; he appears as a butch male with his wife and kids. For LaRue, the transformation from male to female is a wondrous illusion, requiring gobs of makeup, intricate costumes and much binding and padding. Femininity is achieved, like Mount Everest, and the audience is reassured that men and women are nothing alike.

Working in another tradition, Charles Pierce, advertises his homosexuality by identifying with the divas he impersonates - Crawford, Davis, Garland, etc. He dresses up like them, but he doesn't like them. They represent his sissy, damaged self, for even if his subjects have strength, he plays up their egotism, loneliness, and self-abuse. This kind of drag is about slumming in femininity, a place like Lower East Bitch. And it's a day trip. Pierce's actual maleness, like Danny LaRue's, is never in doubt, and everyone is invited to share in the idea that femaleness is a debased state.

Charles Busch is part of a third, happier tradition, which includes Bloopers, Charles Ludlam, and La Grand Scena Opera. 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. His costumes, usually consisting of a wig, eye shadow, and a skimpy tog, don't soften his gawky boy's body, and he doesn't pad his chest - on occasion he even bares it. In Busch's art, to go from boy to girl or girl to boy is not an arduous climb or a decadent fall but a pass through a door inside the self.

Psycho Beach Party, starring Busch and his superb Theatre-in-Limbo company, is a peach, his funniest and wisest, play so far. It's a spoof of early '60s surfing movies which dismantles the *mishegas* of the age, while letting us enjoy our nostalgia for it. Remember *Gidget*? (Don't lie.) Busch plays Chicklet, a skinny girl who wants to surf. Best friend Berdine (Becky London) keeps her informed about existentialism - "Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and dear, dear Jean-Paul." And sometime friend Marvel Ann (Michael Belanger), whose every bleached follicle and curvaceous false home toward marriageable flesh, makes Chicklet's head spin with awe and horror.

But that's not all that's whirring in the child's brain. Beneath the surface of this innocent creature and seemingly simple epoch lurk psychosexual beats that can devour Cleveland in

one bit, then turn around and eat Chicago. Chicklet's Mom (Meghan Robinson) starts off talking like Donna Reed but soon reveals herself a full-clawed Faye Dunaway-as-Joan Crawford. Of course her kid's personality is shattered. And from the depths of Chicklet rises alter ego Ann Bowman, dominatrix/empress of the world. Without giving all the delicious details away, suffice it to say she wreaks havoc on the denizens of Malibu, including the budding gays, Yo-Yo (Robert Carey) and Provoloney (Andy Halliday), and Bettina Barnes (Theresa Marlowe), a Marilyn Monroe-type iron butterfly, on the lam from her studio and heading for Lee Strasberg. At the end, Star Cat (Arnie Kolodner), a psychiatrist-in-training- turned-beach-bum, conducts a wham-bam five-minute psychoanalysis, and the parts of Chicklet are reunited.

Every aspect of the production, under Kenneth Elliott's direction, adds to its quick-wittedness. B.T. Whitehill's backdrop is at once a surfer girl and a Rorschach blot, suggesting a vagina flanked by two penises. (At least that's what I saw.) Costume designer John Glaser's bubble dresses and Elizabeth Katherine Carr's bouffant hairdos seem inflated with sexual hysteria, and choreographer Jeff Veazey's limbo number captures the klutziness of beer-guzzling white kids going Caribbean. None of the performers mugs or breaks character; all mesh within the controlling atmosphere of Charles Busch's self-knowing persona.

"Darling, what a great Lucy, I'll be Ethel." Busch's art has passed through anxiety. He can say anything, imagine anything, and not despise himself for it. This unembittered acceptance is the key to his radicalism, allowing him to venture bravely into his fantasies without minimizing their scariness.

He does miss a chance to stir our psyches, thought, by not casting women as studs. Granted, to generate excitement, Western women can't just put on men's clothes, because, decades ago, they appropriated them for daily wear. Women have to wear facial hair, chest hair, and a stuffed jock - as Lily Tomlin does playing Tommy Velour. The sight of Tomlin smarmily ogling women and hitching up her pants is indeed exciting.

Still, so long as maleness is deemed superior to femaleness, the notion of a woman wishing to be a man will never seem as perverse as a man wishing to be a woman. There's evidence that men like to play with this fantasy in the fad of homosexual and heterosexual males wearing earrings, but the terror is defused by the macho set of piercing. Charles Busch doesn't defuse it. He lets go of the masculine without fear of castration and takes pleasure in acts considered degrading and wimpy. "I like being girlish, womanly, and vixenish," his persona says. Who doesn't sometimes? His unembarrassed fantasies of otherness invite the audience to indulge in their fantasies. His persona to indulge in their fantasies. His persona symbolizes the forbidden leap for everybody, whether it's a man wanting his female lover to stage all the parts of a sexual scene, or that woman wanting to take control, or a lesbian wanting to wear high heels and a dress.
