

The Lady in Question

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No question - the 'Lady' is a champ

By CLIVE BARNES

A cross-dressed man trying to look like Norma Shearer trying to play Joan Crawford; a story that sounds as if it broke down on a Hollywood backlot and nobody troubled to tow it away; camp clichés so corny that you wonder why are they not nowadays coming packaged as oat bran. What kind of show is this? You might well ask.

Yet there need be, indeed there can be, no question about it. Charles Busch's "The Lady in Question," which opened last night at the Orpheum Theater, is bewitchingly entertaining, and the words are chosen as carefully as the lady.

I loved it. I couldn't have had a better time, unless perhaps someone had given me popcorn. For "The Lady," who is neither a travesty nor a tramp, is, on the other hand, a very beguiling kind of movie spoof.

Funnily enough for such a straightforward piece of stage-craft it is oddly difficult both to describe and even categorize. There would be a tendency to make it sound just like a burlesque parody, an epicene extravaganza full of glitz, glitterdust and outrage.

But it isn't. A parody I suppose it is, but this is a very serious, even loving parody, that almost but definitely not quite – it runs a fine line of humor here – demands to be taken on the very same terms of that which it is satirizing. A neat trick.

The time is 1940. The place recognizably the no-man's-land of Warner Bros. – or, just perhaps, MGM. It is a movie set in Nazi Germany, "land of beer, Wagner and terror."

The tone is so precise that you expect Paul Lukas around every corner, Peter Lorre lurking in every doorway, and Paul Henreid searching for an exit.

And the story – and this is the first and last surprise – is oddly interesting. It compels the same suspension of disbelief, suggests the same black-and-white rules of monodrama, as did the self-same movies of its period and genre. Even the carefully selected background music strums the right heartstrings.

This tale of an American son (Professor Erik Maxwell, played by Arnie Kolodner) rescuing his German actress mother (Raina Aldric played – and played to shreds – by Meghan Robinson) from the Nazis, with the uncertain aid of a glamorous concert pianist with a honky-tonk past (Gertrude Garnet, the

irrepressible and heart-burning Busch) is no worse than many still to be encountered on the late, late show. Yet funnier. And sweeter.

For what makes this entertainment bewitching is, in fact, its surprisingly sweet air of a cheerful party. Busch and his cohorts, a company aptly called Theater-in-Limbo, have the knack of culturing a cult to a point where its commonplaces seem as lovably familiar as family jokes.

The staging by Kenneth Elliott (who also plays a cuddly old German professor and a toady, middle-aged Nazi aristocrat) never puts a foot in the wrong mouth, the clever scenery by B.T. Whitehill and the ornately underlined period costumes by Robert Locke and Jennifer Arnold add to the joys of a play that flags a little only at its false-ending conclusion.

The acting is as flawless as a multi-faceted zircon. Naturally the more extravagant players have the best of the night, and Robinson (in two roles, each more vampirishly histrionic than the other), Theresa Marlowe, Julie Halston and Andy Halliday, the latter particularly as a murderous nymphet, leave no rag untattered.

Finally in the eye of the storm is Busch himself/herself, serenely outrageous as the woman in question. I have an abnormal prejudice against drag, but when the performance is as mistressful as this, my prejudice simply fades into wonder.

Do not miss “The Lady in Question” – she is more than you bargained for.

The Lady in Question, written by Charles Busch; directed by Kenneth Elliott; set design by B.T. Whitehill; costume design by Robert Locke and Jennifer Arnold; wig design by Elizabeth Katherine Carr, lighting design by Vivien Leone; production stage manager, Robert Vandergriff. Presented by Kyle Renick and Mr. Elliott. At the Orpheum Theater, 126 Second Avenue, at Eighth Street.

Mr. Busch (Gertrude Garnet), James Cahill (Voice of the Announcer), Mark Hamilton (Professor Mittelhoffer/Dr. Maximillian), Theresa Marlowe (Heidi Mittelhoffer), Robert Carey (Karel Freiser), Arnie Kolodner (Prof. Erik Maxwell), Andy Halliday (Hugo Hoffmann/Lotte von Elsner), Mr. Elliott (Baron Wilhelm von Elsner), Julie Halston (Kitty, the Countess de Borgia), Meghan Robinson (Augusta von Elsner/Raina Aldric)
