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GRAB CHARLES

A most unusual leading lady: An interview with Charles Busch

By Gregg Shapiro

Is there anything Charles Busch can't do? With a curriculum vitae that includes Tony Award-nominated playwright, actor, cabaret performer, novelist, filmmaker, and visual artist, Busch is simply brimming with talent. With the publication of "Leading Lady: A Memoir of a Most Unusual Boy" (Smart Pop/BenBella, 2023), Busch can now add memoirist to his long list of accomplishments. Bursting with details both personal (the loss of his mother Gertie at a young age, his close relationship with his Aunt Lil, his coming out) and professional (his amazing performance career, his interactions with entertainment legends), Busch takes readers into his confidence and generously shares his life experiences. Charles was gracious enough to make time for an interview in advance of the release of "Leading Lady."

Gregg Shapiro: Charles, why was now the time to write your memoir "Leading Lady: A Memoir of a Most Unusual Boy"?

Charles Busch: I could say that now that I'm in my late sixties I'm finally in a place of wise self-reflection. However, I began this book when I was in my early fifties [laughs]! It's taken me all this time to figure out the structure and to get it all down and then to edit it to a reasonable length. At one point, the manuscript was over 450 pages, and I hadn't yet reached the age of fourteen [laughs]. In every way, I'm a storyteller. I transform my experiences into narrative while I'm living them. It was inevitable that I share these memories in book form.

GS: Were you a journal keeper or did you rely on your good memory for the details?

CB: So many of these stories I've told and retold many times in interviews, in daily conversation and even reduced to cabaret banter. The challenge was to force myself to recall my emotional states and go beyond glib repartee. After the final proofed draft was sent off to the printer, I was cleaning out a forbidden file cabinet drawer and discovered eight diaries covering the years 1975-78; a key period in my development as a writer/actor. I had no recollection of writing them. I chose not to open these diaries and put them right back in the drawer. It would only frustrate me. Anyway, my twenty-ish self wasn't that full of insight. I was too busy pushing and

scheming and plotting how I was going to invade the world of the theater while trying to earn a buck. I suspect (and I hope) these diaries were more like datebooks.

GS: Portions of the book are told in a non-chronological fashion. Why did you decide to take that approach in telling your story?

CB: I made an attempt at writing it in a strictly linear form. "Chapter One. I am born." But I get antsy reading show biz autobiographies where it takes many chapters detailing their grandparents and parents' lives and then the author's childhood and adolescence before it gets to the glamorous part. Therefore, I chose to begin with a scene from my adulthood then flashback cinematically. When I write about a



childhood incident, I'll be reminded of a later experience as an adult and go off on that tangent. I'm continually amazed that I've been able to meet and even become friends with the stars of stage and screen that I worshipped when I was a stagestruck child.

GS: I'm so glad you said that because, throughout the book, you generously share space with other high-profile folks, including Kim Novak, Patrick Swayze, Liza Minnelli, Zoe Caldwell, Joan Rivers, and Claudette Colbert, writing respectfully about your interactions with them.

CB: I've had such a unique career.



As a male actress who evokes stars of the golden age, it's wild that at times I've been accepted as one of those actresses and have even shared dressing rooms with these legendary ladies. With Joan Rivers, the relationship was a profound one where she became something of a mother figure for me.

GS: "Leading Lady" is being published 18 years after John Catania and Charles Ignacio's documentary "The Lady in Question is Charles Busch" was released. Do you consider the two to be connected?

CB: I'll always be grateful to John and Charles for making that documentary. It was something of a three-year ordeal to get through, but they gave me a beautiful gift with this tribute. However, being a film, they couldn't delve into the psychology of many of my life choices with the

thoroughness that one can in a memoir. That said, the narrative is the same and it might be fun for the reader of this new book to watch the movie and see many of the people and clips from the theatrical productions I've written about.

GS: 2023 also marks the 30th anniversary of the publication of your debut novel "Whores of Lost Atlantis." Now that you've written your memoir, do you think you might have another novel in you?

CB: I'd like to write another novel. It's a dream of mine to write a taut and complex murder mystery whodunnit. I think my late Aunt Lil who raised me would make an excellent fictional amateur sleuth. I can envision a series of comic murder mysteries set in the Manhattan of the sixties, investigated by a keenly intelligent Park Avenue widow and her gay teenage nephew.

GS: I'd read that book! In the "Camp Summer Camp" chapter you write about your experiences at summer camp, which made me wonder if you'd seen the new movie "Theater Camp," starring Ben Platt.

CB: I haven't seen the movie yet, but I certainly plan to. Theater camps are fascinating in many ways. For one thing, they can be viewed as a



CHARLES BUSCH IN PSYCHO BEACH PARTY



GS: Beginning with the chapter, “The Bad Old Good Days or The Good Old Bad Days,” and continuing in the chapters that follow, you write about the impact of the AIDS epidemic. Did you find it difficult to write about that subject?

CB: When you push yourself to remember, you get into a kind of hypnotic zone where all sorts of forgotten details float to the surface. A number of times I found myself sobbing in front of my desktop computer. I think so much about my friends who died young. I wonder what would have become of them had they lived. I love them and miss them and am haunted by how they suffered. It was a time of villains and great bravery.

GS: You also wrote about your movies “Psycho Beach Party,” “Die, Mommie, Die!,” and “The Sixth Reel.” Is there any chance that we’ll ever see a movie version of “The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife?”

CB: “The Allergist’s Wife” movie has been in the works for nearly 20 years. Sometimes it’s on and then it fades away and comes back. Right now, it’s suddenly very alive with three wonderful stars attached. Who knows where it will be in six months? I can be maddeningly blasé and detached about the project. It can be borderline obnoxious, but I think it’s a good healthy attitude.

GS: Do you have a book tour in the works, and if so, what can your fans expect from such an event?

CB: I wouldn’t say there will be a tour. That doesn’t seem to happen much these days. But don’t be surprised if I turn up in a couple of select cities with a stack of books to be signed, a grateful smile, and plenty of outrageous stories to share.

microcosm of show business, full of dreams and cut-throat ambition. Within a world of teenagers, you’ll find stars, has-beens, wannabees, hangers-on, and bitter feuds. It’s great fodder for dramatization.

GS: One of the longer chapters in the book, the Chicago-set “The Shopworn Angel,” reveals your experience with David’s Models Agency. What was it like to revisit that chapter of your life?

CB: During my youthful struggles, I viewed my life as an ongoing sitcom with me as the wacky star. I threw myself into the life of a rentboy with enthusiasm and a determination to see how my very individual personality would affect these sexual situations. I have no regrets about my year as a sex worker because I came away with insight and sympathy for men entrenched in the closet and the need for lonely people to have someone listen to their stories.

GS: Speaking of Chicago, the first Charles Busch play that I ever saw was “Vampire Lesbians of Sodom” at the Royal George Theater, which starred Jackie Hoffman and Alexandra Billings, among others. Did you have an opportunity to see that production?

CB: I heard it was a wonderful production. It ought to have been with that level of talent on stage. Alas, I never saw it. In fact, after the production was licensed, I never heard from the producer again. Several years later, I discovered that the show was still running! The producer never paid me one penny in royalties and then when I made a fuss, he quickly closed the show and disappeared. At the risk of coming off like an Actor’s Equity card carrying St. Francis of Assisi, I suppose the confidence and experience it gave those gifted young performers and the fun and joy for all those audiences were ultimately the most important.

