

REVIEW

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Our Leading Lady

By DON SHEWEY

OUR LEADING LADY * Written by Charles Busch * Directed by Lynne Meadow * Starring Kate Mulgrew * Manhattan Theatre Club Stage II, New York City (open-ended run).

“People tend to think of me as so influenced by Hollywood movies, and that’s true,” the playwright and performer Charles Busch says in the recent documentary *The Lady In Question Is Charles Busch*. “But maybe even more, I’m influenced by my interest in 19th century theater.” Part personal obsession with the glamour and grandeur of Sarah Bernhardt, part scholarly fixation on the bygone history of theatrical actor-managers and their repertory companies, Busch’s interest comes to full flower in *Our Leading Lady*, his new play at Manhattan Theatre Club.

Busch is best-known for playing the fiery/coquettish female leads in his often campy genre studies, from *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* (1984) to *Shanghai Moon* (1999). The tongue-in-cheek nature of his entertaining drag performances often overshadowed his considerable ambitions as a playwright. But his career took a big step from fringe cult success to mainstream acceptance when Manhattan Theatre Club produced the hilarious comedy *The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife* in 2000, cast it with major stars (Linda Lavin in the title role), and moved it to Broadway, where it ran for over a year before touring the country.

I foresee *Our Leading Lady* having a similarly long life because of the ingenious subject matter. Set in Washington, DC, in 1865, the play is about Laura Keene, the British-born stage actress whose company was performing Tom Taylor’s *Our American Cousin* at Ford’s Theatre the night Abraham Lincoln was shot and killed by John Wilkes Booth. In classic Charles Busch fashion, *Our Leading Lady* is a backstage comedy in which a presidential assassination is not merely a national tragedy but also a vexing interruption in a powerful woman’s quest for fame and glory. Imagine the collision of *Gone with the Wind* and *Noises Off*.

As a touring star, Keene (played with diva-esque magnificence by Kate Mulgrew) is stuck with a supporting company of local actors – an alcoholic leading man, a staunchly Southern never-quite-made-it husband-and-wife team, an overgrown child-actress ingénue, and a dotty old lady. (These stock types are beautifully fleshed out by some terrific New York stage veterans: Maxwell Caulfield, Reed Birney, Kristine Nielsen, Amy Rutberg, and Barbara Bryne.) Negotiating to take over Ford’s Theatre, fire the company, and bring in her own, Keene hopes to gain leverage by using all her charm and connections to wheedle President Lincoln into attending the final performance of *Our American Cousin*. She is attended at all times by her maidservant Madame Wu-Chan (the wonderful Ann Duquesnay), whom everyone pretends not to notice is an escaped slave made up to look Asian. And it wouldn’t be a Charles Busch play without some delicious gay subplot, in this case involving the husband Gavin’s private tutorials with the company’s eager-beaver young apprentice Ferguson.

The play is at once an affectionate depiction of show folk in all their self-absorption and a refreshingly off-kilter look at the familiar story of a moment where American history and American theater crossed paths. It's also a fascinating marriage of classic American comedy, Kaufman-and-Hart vintage, with the very gay Theater of the Ridiculous tradition that Busch inherited from his inspiration and mentor, Charles Ludlam. Watching how beautifully Busch has carried forward the Ridiculous legacy of celebrating and mocking theatrical styles at the same time, I couldn't help wondering what kind of work Ludlam would be doing now if he hadn't died of AIDS in 1987.

Just as Ludlam's two-person multi-character quick-change "penny dreadful" *The Mystery of Irma Vep* continues to be a regional theater staple, I can imagine *Our Leading Lady* being snapped up by every rep company in the country, because of its mixture of juicy roles and serious subject matter treated with high comic style. It's hard to imagine a better production, though, than the one at Manhattan Theatre Club directed by Lynne Meadow, who also made a laugh riot of *Allergist's Wife*. The physical production is plush even by Broadway standards. Jane Greenwood's costumes especially are so yummy you want to eat them. But ultimately it's all about the performances Meadow pulls out of her A-list cast. You'll never seen character performances better than these by Nielsen and Bryne, and Mulgrew's star turn is impressive. Her understudy is listed in the program as Rita Rehn, although in a pinch I'll bet the author himself wouldn't mind stepping into the 19th century role of his dreams.