

Review

Charles Busch - Alone With a Cast of Thousands

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Busch Wacky

"Charles Busch Alone – With a Cast of Thousands" at Valencia Rose, SF.
through Feb. 12th.

By EDWARD GUTHMANN

On the surface, Charles Busch seems the frailest of men: a soft, wand-like frame, willowy arms, no shoulder to speak of and a thick mane of androgynous brown hair. Despite his slightness, however, Busch is a powerhouse on stage, exuding strength and fierceness and gothic hysteria at will.

In "Camp Kitchiwamee," the first of two monologues he performs at Valencia Rose through mid-February, Busch plays a crazed, forest-dwelling hermit who terrifies three runaway campers with her tales of a spectacular mass murder. Busch's shoulders lurch forward when he becomes the old crone. The arms fan out and curl in, his fingers forming claws. His long cleft chin juts out to punctuate the words, and he bends diagonally from the hip, narrowing his eyes to recall the vendetta of Trudy Louise Hooker:

"It was a terrible tragedy when old man Hooker and his wife were killed. Something went wrong with the brakes and the car went clear over a bluff. For months families on their Sunday hikes would find a finger or a foot....sundry parts."

In another stanza of the same piece, Busch is a rangy, swaggering camp counselor, then turns into all three campers ("a fatso, a fairy and a retard"), and later each of the poor-white family members who succumb to Trudy Louise's wrath. With a pivot of the leg or a sudden change in posture, he slips in and out of skins, juggling a whole panoply of voices and characters.

Busch is neither stand-up comic nor actor, but a monologist – a word that's grown archaic from lack of use. It means that Busch works alone, but also that he creates whole worlds on stage: his characters soliloquize, then interact; still others who are only spoken to or about also seem magically to appear.

By common assent the greatest monologist of all was Ruth Draper, who in the '30s and '40s conceived a body of work she regarded not as monologues, but as one-

woman “plays.” Draper died in 1957, and in the ‘70s her devotee, Lily Tomlin, picked up the mantle with a gallery of kinky and tender types. Now there is Charles Busch, 27, a formidable and offbeat talent who not only plays a good two-dozen men and women in his current performance, “Charles Busch Alone – With A Cast of Thousands,” but writes all his material as well.

Busch, who resides in New York and has a drama degree from Northwestern, has worked solo for five years but is just now making his West Coast debut. You can hear in his work years of pouring over the fine recordings Draper left of her performances: in the crisp diction; in the accumulation of detail; in his ability to conjure a whole roomful of people and to vitalize a character – particularly female characters – with amazing elasticity and concentration.

Take Lady Olivia, for instance, the frankly phony society doyenne who greets her party guests with a mad shriek and a taxi-hailing salute of her arm: “Poppy! Come over here, mon frere de coeur. New whiskers, aren’t you cunning? Darling, remind me to tell you about my feud with the countess – you’ll spin!”

Draper’s not the only influence. Busch is also an avid student of vintage Hollywood, and the echoes of grade-B potboilers and four-hankie women’s pictures run through his work. He even structures his pieces like screenplays. In “After You’re Gone,” a Damon Runyonesque murder mystery and the second piece in his current show, a young man is implicated in his father’s death (“Why would I want to kill him? I barely know him!”). On the trail of the murderer, he meets a freaky bunch of high- and low-life eccentrics: Ardella Williams, a broken-down jazz singer who longs for the days of “sleepin’ in sable pajamas”; Chicken Joey, a teenage callboy with a Bowery Boys accent; Anita Harlow, a former starlet with Sex Kittens From Outer Space on her resume; and Count Ernesto, a 90-year-old Italian blueblood, grieving at the demise of “True elegance.”

Given the sparseness of Busch’s production – no wigs or costumes, his only props a cigarette and muffler – the illusion he crates is all the more astonishing.

Charles Busch is simply wonderful: a superb technician and fine writer, quick and precise, full of surprises and hysterically funny.
