

The Lady in Question

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, JULY 26, 1989

Scene: Europe 1940. Subject: True Kitsch

By FRANK RICH

Selfish is too kind a word for Gertrude Garnet, “the leading concert pianist of the international stage” and the all-American heroine of “The Lady in Question,” Charles Busch’s latest celebration of Hollywood kitsch. Hitler may be on the mark, but Gertrude, on tour in Bavaria, can’t worry her pretty head about politics. She finds the Germans “so warm, so friendly” and reassures the Nazis’ victims that patience will reward them with an afterlife of “Champagne and caviar.” For Gertrude, art comes first, then her wardrobe, then her cosmetics bag (Suzette, the maid, has stolen it) and then, of course, love. To paraphrase Lorenz Hart, the lady in question is a tramp.

As both written and acted by Mr. Busch, she is also hilarious company. This performer’s Theater-in-Limbo company, best known for the long-running “Vampire Lesbians of Sodom,” has found its most assured style and, I suspect, its biggest hit in the new play at the Orpheum Theater. Not that “The Lady in Question” can precisely be called a new play. A saga of war-torn romance and intrigue set in 1940, the piece has been distilled from such patriotic Hollywood pot-boilers of the period as “Escape,” “Reunion in France” and “Above Suspicion.” These were movies in which determined American women wearing Adrian gowns (Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer) joined with square-jawed Joes (Robert Taylor, Fred MacMurray) to beat suave Nazi swine (Conrad Veidt, Basil Rathbone) in a perilous midnight dash to the Swiss border.

As always, Mr. Busch knows his M-G-M schlock, but never previously has he or his director, Kenneth Elliott, dished it out with such sustained, well-paced discipline. Along with its double-entendre groaners, “The Lady in Question” actually offers some melodramatic chills and, thanks to the witty production design, the backlot shock effects allotted movies with B budgets. It’s all here: the overblown soundtrack score, in which Wagner and Strauss enjoy a shotgun collaboration with Max Steiner; the propagandistic asides identifying the American cause with both God and Joe Stalin; the fake snow powdering the Alpine ski slopes; the stern, omniscient narrator who warns the audience that “yes, human life is cheap in the fatherland.”

While Mr. Busch’s plays are often linked with Charles Ludlam’s lighter efforts, such generalizing distorts the artistry of both. Mr. Ludlam, a theatrical classicist and a political iconoclast, usually had a second agenda, ideological or esthetic percolating within his gender-flipped sendups. Mr. Busch’s attitude is the simpler one of “Hooray for Hollywood!” The man revels in trash. “The Lady in Question” mimics its source material so accurately and affectionately that it is as much homage as parody; the tone is closer to “Dames at Sea” or a Mel Brooks film than it is to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. I’m not sure the

show would play much differently if Mr. Busch took the radical step of casting a woman as Gertrude Garnet.

But what actor of either gender could top Mr. Busch? Last seen as Chicklet, a teen-age girl with a multiple personality disorder in the lesser “Psycho Beach Party,” he continues to be the Sybil of camp. With red Rita Hayworth hair and a low voice that variously recalls Bankhead, Bacall, Stanwyck, Davis and Russell, Mr. Busch is a walking anthology of feminine Hollywood legends. Yet the performance is not another cabaret drag act in which the breathless quick changes are the oppressively showy point. His Gertrude is a seamless, often subtle characterization, ready to meet any challenge, including the Greer Garson-like inspirational speeches that transform the heroine from a Stork Club hedonist into a selfless patriot by the final clinch. So complex is the illusion created by Mr. Busch that when Gertrude appears in Dietrich-esque blazer and pants to go riding at Baron von Elsner’s schloss, we don’t even stop to think that we are watching a man impersonate a woman impersonating a man.

Mr. Busch’s fellow clowns easily exceed their past Theater-in-Limbo turns. In the other cross-gender performance, Andy Halliday offers a vicious blond Nazi youth in braids and bows – a psychotic hybrid of a Trapp Family Singer and Patty McCormack in “The Bad Seed.” Julie Halston, as Gertrude’s sidekick since vaudeville days in Sandusky, Ohio, is the apotheosis of wisecracking second bananas of the Joan Blondell-Eve Arden era. In the evening’s most amusing double act, Meghan Robinson plays two disparate mothers, a Fuhrer-worshipping Baroness and a high-minded anti-Nazi actress so self-dramatizing that one often feels she would rather win an Oscar than get out of Germany alive. “I must walk to freedom!” is Ms. Robinson’s histrionic vow, and how she does so, her wheelchair and a steep staircase notwithstanding, gives “The Lady in Question” its funniest excursion into physical comedy.

It’s a tribute to Mr. Busch that, without raising his voice, he is never upstaged by this riotous crew. Like the actresses he emulates, he rules by force of personality, often proving the cool, elegant, just slightly off-center eye of the farcical storm around him. That the lady in question is a man soon becomes beside the point. What matters here is that the performer in question is a star.

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)