

Red Scare on Sunset

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An Era When More Than The Lipstick Was Red

By JAN STUART

Something very interesting is happening to Charles Busch. A bit of his haute-couture heroines is beginning to rub off on him, and I'm not talking about their eye shadow.

For those of you who have not beat a path down MacDougal Street or Second Avenue in the last seven years, Charles Busch is a kitsch-movie king who has hit theater pay dirt playing kitsch movie queens. Busch's "Vampire Lesbians of Sodom," "Psycho Beach Party" and "The Lady in Question" lampooned decades of B-movie conventions with a devastating eye for acting and fashion mannerisms that revealed a lifetime of afternoons in darkened cinemas.

"The Lady in Question," if not Busch's funniest play, was his most realized, to the extent that it worked equally well as a sendup of a suspense genre and an example of that genre. In that anti-Nazi propaganda "film," Busch played Gertrude Garnet, a narcissistic concert pianist who is swept up in the whirlpool of wartime Europe. With the dawning of patriot consciousness, glamorous Gertrude trades in her makeup kit for a gun and becomes a fearless spy for the Allied cause.

Mary Dale, the '50s film star Busch plays in his latest romp, "Red Scare on Sunset," is a soul sister to Gertrude. Mary is a radiant embodiment of the old Hollywood star system whose non-nonsense approach to acting is "Learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture." More willfully naïve than every Doris Day mannequin rolled into one, Mary is blissfully unaware that her houseboy is trying to seduce her husband, her husband is having an affair, her all-American best friend is a former porno actress, and that all of them are being pulled into the tentacles of the Communist menace sweeping the country.

Taking the form of a red-baiting propaganda tract designed to stir the hearts and minds of Hollywood, "Red Scare on Sunset" documents Mary's uproarious conversion from Rodeo Drive robot to McCarthy marauder, naming names (including her husband) before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Significantly, it also marks the politicization of Charles Busch, whose most subversive act to date has been donning a dress and doing Greer Garson better than Greer Garson. With its benign '50s Technicolor veneer, "Red Scare" scores some tart contemporary points about the lemming instincts of the entertainment industry, the omnipresent homophobia of Hollywood and flag-waving as a self-promotional tool.

The polemics never upstage the parody, however. True to his alter-egos Mary and Gertrude, Charles Busch is still concerned with looking fabulous and putting on a good show. "Red Scare"

seduces with the shameless allure of an old movie trailer that trumpets: "Julie Halston stars as Pat Pilford, the slapstick radio queen with a terrible secret ('Girl, there is strange sex going on all over this town!'); Andy Halliday is Malcolm, the devoted houseboy living in a bizarre netherworld of half-men ('I came from Secaucus, New Jersey as a young cosmetologist with a dream!'), and Judith Hansen is Marta Towers, the sultry actress with an unsavory method ('She's had more Russians in her than the Kremlin!')."

As ever, Busch is exceedingly generous in tailoring comic turns for his daffy stock company, which also includes Mark Hamilton vaulting through four roles, and Arnie Kolodner oozing his young Jimmy Stewart charm as Mary's Commie-victimized husband. Busch devotees will miss the extravagant presence of the late and deeply lamented Meghan Robinson, but some of the slack left by her absence is taken up by Julie Halston's unharnessed field day as a comedienne with the banana-peel instincts of Martha Raye and the slippery soul of Anita Bryant. They are all directed with merry aplomb by Kenneth Elliott, who is to Charles Busch what George Cukor was to every major actress of the '40s and '50s.

The top banana, by far, is the indefatigable Mr. Busch, who has polished his repertoire of quadruple takes, S-curve grimaces, descending octaves and libidinous growls to a dizzying sheen. Whether or not you cotton to his Lucy-ish brand of mugging, you have to champion the ingenuity of Busch's writing, which twirls twist and spins into comedy heaven with an encyclopedic command of movie history. The W.P.A. Theater should think about selling popcorn in the lobby. With plenty of cheese.