

The Importance of Being Bette

Bloodlips in *Get Hur*, a Roman epic.

By Gerard Raymond

England's Queen Elizabeth had a horrible year, but English queen Bette Bourne's year was just fabulous. Bourne is currently holding court as Emperor Hadrian at Dance Theater Workshop in the Bloodlips production of *Get Hur*. It's a Roman epic that Charlton Heston would never have had the guts to make—about Hadrian's love for the beautiful boy Antinous. But then Heston never had Bourne's chutzpah. As British theater critic Jim Hiley put it, Bette Bourne is "not so much a drag queen as an empress of the transvestite arts."

When we met in his London flat, Bourne showed me the head-shot he intends to use in *Spotlight*, the British actor's directory. In the photo he is wearing full make-up, long diamante earrings, and a low-cut dress. It was taken from his appearance as a 200-year-old castrato in Neil Bartlett's *Sarrasine*. "It's going to appear in the men's section," Bourne says with his deep, raucous laugh. "That will have a certain potency all of its own."

Bourne co-founded Bloodlips, an Obie-award winning vaudeville drag company, some 15 years ago, but he became a drag queen during the birth of England's Gay Liberation Movement in 1970. Bourne was in his early 30s and pursuing a career as an actor in the commercial West End theater at the time. He attended one of the first meetings of the Gay Liberation Front because he had heard there were gorgeous guys there. "So sex really got me interested in sexuality," Bourne laughs. But soon he got very involved with the organization and starting hanging out with a group of drag queens who also attended the meetings.

"Being the theatrical type, I got into drag, and found it very exciting," says Bourne. "I felt it was important politically to get into drag and live in it." There were about a dozen of them, and Bourne says, not surprisingly, they were regarded as "the dirty water of gay liberation." The others didn't want to have much to do with

them, so they formed a commune and lived together in an old film studio—as drag queens. "Just putting yourself into a frock in the street 24 hours a day is quite instructive, you know," Bourne remarks wryly.

By then, Bourne had adopted the name of Bette. He does not acknowledge his original name and only his mother is allowed to call him by that name. He doesn't wear a dress all day anymore ("If you had to get dragged out every time you go out to get a paper, you are going to get exhausted!"), but he paints his nails, and wears his hair long, and insists on being identified as Bette. "When I was passing for straight, people felt more comfortable. I think visibility is important, and I like being looked at."

From the same impulse to be Bette came the idea to form Bloodlips. "We wanted to get into frocks, jump up and down on the stage, and scream our tits off. That was our great political desire," he says smiling. And indeed, that is what they have been doing for these past 15 years. Bloodlips' aesthetic is spectacle on shoe-string. Anyone who saw their show *Gland Motel* is not likely to forget the famous bacon and eggs number in which the chorus, dressed up as a traditional breakfast, sang "Keep your sunny-side up" while Bourne ran around in a chef's hat prodding them with a fork.

For costumes they use their own clothes, and construct elaborate accessories from odd bits and pieces. In *Get Hur*, they find inventive uses for old curtains, rubber gloves, plastic bags, laundry

Bette Bourne as Hadrian. Ingrid Kallina





baskets, and kitchen stools. Their general style is a studied casualness and is derived from the vaudeville, music hall, and panto traditions. The Bloodlips shows are directed by Bourne, because, he says, he is the pushiest of the lot. "You come up out of street theater," he remarked recently, "and it's the bossiest queen who pulls it all together." Actually, having worked in the theater for 35 years, he is also the most experienced for the job. In any event, a Bloodlips show is also a collaborative effort, and each actor helps to shape the show as well.

Behind the foolery, the song and dance routines, and the dreadful puns, there is also a serious undertone to Bloodlips shows. Its very first production, which was based on the story of the Ugly Duckling, was a coming out story which celebrated the diversity of the gay community. To the strains of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, three eggs were hatched on Normality Farm—a boy duck, a girl duck, and an ugly duckling. Thrown out of the farm for looking odd, the ugly duckling goes on a journey through the forest where he meets various gay types in the form of different birds. When he finally becomes a swan, he has learned that swans come in all shapes and sizes.

In the past 18 months, Bourne has been working almost non-stop. Apart from the Bloodlips/Split Britches take on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which toured the U.S. and England, the projects were all outside his company. He toured with *Sarasine*, and appeared in two television productions in England. Being a drag queen gives him the license to play any sex he choses. In addition to the current Hadrian, last summer he played Jacques

in Maria Aitken's production of *As You Like It* at London's Regent's Park. *Get Hur*, which was presented in London last fall, marks his return to the vaudeville world of Bloodlips.

Get Hur unfolds, in a typically erratic Bloodlips fashion, as a detective story. The show is an expansion of a three-hander playwright Ray Dobbins wrote for Bloodlips four years ago. Dobbins, who is American and lives in New York, has written many Bloodlips shows, including *Gland Motel*. Antinous, the emperor's lover, is found dead and no one knows why or how. There are several historical theories about his death, which some say was suicide and others attribute to foul play. Bourne's own theory is that Hadrian was notorious for some very cruel acts during his reign, and the 18 year-old Antinous killed himself because he couldn't cope with the realities of being the emperor's lover.

Get Hur is as funny as Bloodlips's previous work: Antinous's buttocks light up whenever he is addressed tenderly, and Hadrian stops the show with the line, "I hate war, so many accessories!" But on a serious note, Bourne says that the show is offered as a balm to a community devastated by AIDS. "This is a gay theater company doing gay plays for gay people. We do shows for ourselves."

Get Hur is also a love story. This is the first time the theme of romance has cropped up in a Bloodlips show. In the show, Antinous is played by Precious Pearl, Bourne's real-life lover. Pearl, whose other name is Paul Shaw, joined Bloodlips soon after its inception. He and Bourne have lived together since then. "Playing a love story with the man I love and live with, gives it some very interesting edges that blur in," comments Bourne.

"People are being forced into romance due to the hideous circumstances of the plague," Bourne adds. "And a lot of us who are left are naturally valuing each other a lot more. A lot of that horrible kind of bitter alcoholic world that was very prevalent in the '50s and '60s, when I was a youngster, is gone," he continues. "There were literally millions of fat and drunken queens sitting at bars wondering what the hell was happening with their lives." He says this scenario is just not in the cards for Bette Bourne. "I can't imagine that I will ever be a lonely old queen. I'm just not the type," he says laughing. TW

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