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NEW YORK STORIES

Out of the Busch League

Charles Busch's *Tale of the Allergist's Wife* begins
a national tour at L.A.'s Ahmanson Theater

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Charles Busch first acquired a cult following in New York's East Village, but it is from Hollywood that he has drawn inspiration for much of his work. "I'm absolutely not one of those L.A.-bashing New York people," declares the actor, playwright, and drag diva extraordinaire. "I just love it there, although I have a real problem because I don't know how to drive."

California actually figures prominently in the many different stages of Busch's over two decade-long career to date. Prior to his rise to fame as the grand dame of Avenue C, where his movie-derived midnight show favorites such as *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* and *Psycho Beach Party* were spawned, he toured the country with a series of solo shows. The first time he had "a feeling of some kind of success," he says, was performing *Charles Busch Alone With A Cast of Thousands* at San Francisco's Valencia Rose in the early 1980s. And while *Vampire Lesbians* ran for five years Off-Broadway, he claims the "glammed-up" Los Angeles production at Coronet Theater was one where they "really did it right." Now, his current Broadway hit comedy, *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, starring Valerie Harper, Tony Roberts, and Michele Lee, commences a national tour at L.A.'s Ahmanson Theater.

Reclining on a couch in his apartment in New York's Greenwich Village, the soft-spoken, shaven-headed Busch seems a far cry

from the grand ladies he has channeled with such aplomb on stage. But the red-painted walls and what he has described as "Chinese bordello" decor may provide some clues to the screen goddess's alter egos waiting impatiently in the wings. His best-known drag-

theater work from *Vampire Lesbians* in 1984 through to his Bette Davis/Joan Crawford spoof *Die, Mommy, Die*, which he wrote specifically for Los Angeles and performed in 1999 at West Hollywood's Coast Playhouse, has sprung from an enduring love affair with the cinema. "All my life, since early childhood, I read everything I could about Hollywood history and absorbed all the old movies," he reports. Now he's a frequent contributor to documentaries about old Hollywood, the most recent being the forthcoming Turner Network Television documentary on Joan Crawford. "I'm Joan's main defender. It's a role I never quite intended, but I think she's a maligned figure and did some awfully good work." The documentary identifies Busch as playwright and film historian. "I find it a little embarrassing because I'm just a fan who knows a lot."

"I have this odd career where people seem to know me exclusively from so many different areas," Busch continues. Many will identify him with his role as the death-row inmate in the HBO series *Oz*. His film career has so far been small — a drag cameo in *Addams Family Values* and a new part he wrote for himself for the recent



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film adaptation of *Psycho Beach Party*. But Busch will shortly be seen in the leading lady part in a film version of *Die, Mommy, Die*, which started shooting in Los Angeles this May. And since writing and directing a six-minute movie starring Kathy Lee Gifford for Showtime's Quick Flicks, Busch has been bitten by the filmmaking bug and is set to write and direct his first feature film later this year.

Even as a playwright, Busch came largely as a surprise to audiences for *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, his maiden effort on Broadway, which became a runaway hit after opening at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in November 2000. "It's as if I just sprang out of a clamshell on Shubert Alley," he quips wryly. "People came up and said, 'Isn't it wonderful you are finally mainstream.' I didn't think I was that off the beaten track! At first I was a little thrown by this, because it seemed like it was putting down my previous work, and I am very proud of that work. But then the show paid back its investors after three months. When the royalty checks started arriving in the mail I was quickly cured of what ailed me and just had a fabulous time."

The Tale of the Allergist's Wife does mark a few changes from Busch's previous writing: it has no movie parodies, and it doesn't feature a role for himself, in or out of drag. The comedy revolves around Marjorie Taub, a New York City woman whose midlife crisis has reached epic proportions. "It's very specific to the Upper West Side Jewish milieu, and it's a personal play," says Busch. Marjorie's mother in the play is in fact partly based on Busch's Aunt Belle. "It seems that whatever demons and anxieties I have, I share with a lot of people," Busch continues. "I firmly believe that the more the specific you are, the more universal you are." With its witty one-liners and New York comic rhythms, the play superficially resembles the boulevard comedy work of Neil Simon. But leave it to Busch to spice it up: "I don't want to give away the story line, but let's just say I try to take it a little bit further than that genre usually goes." But then, Busch has always gone "a little further." □

Gerard Raymond writes on theater and film and lives in New York City.

The Tale of the Allergist's Wife runs June 18–August 11 at Los Angeles' Ahmanson Theatre. For more information, call (213) 628-2772 or visit www.TaperAhmanson.com.

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