

# TheaterWeek

October 24, 1994/\$3.00 \$4.00 CANADA

## Charles BUSCH

*in trousers*

By Gerard Raymond

Broadway  
Ticket Crisis

By Simi Horwitz

Mandelbaum  
on *Show Boat*





# Charles Busch in Trousers

*Off-Broadway's famed drag diva stars as a male electrolytist in  
You Should Be So Lucky*

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Remember the She-Bitch of Byzantium, the original Vampire Lesbian of Sodom? Well, the Lady in Question is back, but this time she's a gay man and wears trousers. Charles Busch's latest creation is Christopher, a shy and sweet-natured electrolytist who unwittingly wreaks havoc around himself, but invariably ends up with a fortune. Early this June in his New York apartment, Busch talked about the genesis of his new play, *You Should Be So Lucky*, explaining why he decided to leave his dresses in the closet and appear on stage as a man—at least for the time being.

**TheaterWeek:** Isn't this the first time you have written a non-drag part for yourself, that is apart from those solo shows you did at the beginning of your career?

**Charles Busch:** My work as a playwright has basically sprung out of my need to act—both financial and emotional—so almost every play has come out of a fantasy: Wouldn't it be fun to be Joan Crawford or Norma Shearer in an anti-Nazi war movie, or wouldn't it be fun to be Barbara Stanwyck in a Capra Christmas story. Even if they are not movie-inspired, [the fantasies] have always been connected with female images.

From the moment I started doing drag people [began] asking, "When are you going to do a male role?" and I resented that because the implication was that somehow what I was doing wasn't quite legitimate. I believe in drag. I have done it without exception for about ten years and



Matthew Arkin, Charles Busch, and Nell Campbell in *You Should Be So Lucky*. Andrew Leynse

I haven't come near exploring all its possibilities. I didn't feel like stopping it just as I was getting proficient for careerist reasons. But I thought I'd do a male role if I came up with a character and a story that appealed to me. It seemed fun and exciting.

#### How did this story come about?

When I saw *Marvin's Room*, I thought Laura Esterman was so wonderful—she really was playing a saint, and yet she was so unsaccharine. I thought that would be

an interesting thing to play because I tend to play such tough gals. I enjoy being this bitch who maybe later learns a lesson, but who starts off with her values misplaced. So I wanted to do a Cinderella story and I thought I should play a male Cinderella.

I have been working on this play for two years and the story has changed so many times; it now has no resemblance to how it began. For years I talked about doing a play called *Unisex*, set in Greenwich Village in the '70s—Bette Midler at the Baths



**When I was 11,  
my friend  
Ashland  
starred in  
*South Pacific*.**

**My mom said,  
"You can do that."**



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and *After Dark* magazine. Then I thought I really don't need the period. I first made Christopher [the electrolysisist] British. That was really because I was so scared about getting out of drag, I was hoping [to hide behind] the accent. Now there is a lot of me in Christopher. The more I rewrite the play, the more I am actually trying to make it closer to me, because that is the point of getting out of drag. I felt that for me to grow as a writer and an actor, I have to get more personal.

**What are the similarities between Christopher and Charles Busch?**

For one thing, [just as in the play], my lover is a publicist and my apartment is basically the apartment in the play. I guess I tend to be rather reclusive like Christopher and sometimes I have the same kind of aggressive passivity. I have two rather flamboyant sisters and I am very close to them, but they are not at all like Polly, Christopher's flamboyant sister.

**Why electrolysis?**

It's so kooky. I like the idea that even though Christopher is so withdrawn in his work, he is so meticulous and energized, and somehow the idea of people getting hairs plucked out of them is comical and so undignified.

**You have not had a new play in New York since *Red Scare on Sunset* in 1991. What have you been doing in the interim?**

In these past three years, everything I have done has been an experiment. I did Genet's *The Maids* at CSC and sometimes I think it was this horrible failure and then I think I ended up okay. If the critics didn't like me, that is not the be all and end all of everything. Nothing that is painful can be a waste of time, it can only be enlightening, but I'm still not over it. I also did a performance of the Cy Coleman musical *Little Me* at the Birmingham Theater, a small theater near Detroit; I was in drag and I played this old movie actress. I was under contract to Disney for a year to develop two animated features—that was an adventure—but I blew it both times. I did two movies: A little part in *Addams Family Values*, and I played this guy who has AIDS, whom Bridget Fonda is very sweet to, in *It Could Happen to You*.

**Didn't you also do some television work?**

There was a brief period in the mid-Eighties when I wrote a couple of TV pilots. I did them strictly for the money, but a third one I was to star in. I was in



drag and it became an Auntie Mame-type story. I was astonished when CBS approached me. It was their idea. It broke my heart when it didn't go and I decided not to write any more TV pilots. I don't think I am going to be the new Lucy. That door is closed to me.

I also wrote this novel *Whores of Lost Atlantis* . . .

**About the early days of Theater in Limbo, was that autobiographical?**

Totally autobiographical, embarrassingly so. It is about as honest emotionally as I can tell the story about how we all got together and how we did *Vampire Lesbians*. It is exaggerated, compressed and stretched, but all the emotions are what I went through, and our love for each other—it is as true as if I was trying to write a memoir.

**What is the status of the company now?**

We have had terrible deaths in the group; between losing Bobby Carey and Meghan Robinson and Jeff Easy, our choreographer, and other people having their own careers—Julie Halston has a whole new career—it is sort of in limbo. I love throwing together a play in a week, improvising the costumes and going through the closet trying to find something to wear, but it's difficult to sustain the group. The Limbo Lounge [in the East Village] isn't there anymore, and economically. . .once you have had a bathroom backstage it's hard peeing in a cup all over again. But I will certainly write roles for them all again.

**Will we see you in a dress again?**

I intend to keep on doing drag, I love female roles. Charles Busch in a male role—well, we'll see. Maybe I'll be a big flop and I will never get out of a dress again. But I think this is good for me, for my character—to try and to learn. A part of me would like to just go back and do something really safe. I would just love to get my old company back together and write some fabulous drag role for myself, because I have got a million ideas—maybe I would be this chanteuse in the turn of the century. Probably most people who like me would just prefer me to do that instead of trying to shake things up, but it is good to try.

*Charles Busch's You Should Be So Lucky opens at Primary Stages on November 6 (previews from October 19) and is directed by Kenneth Elliott. TW*

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