

# OUT IN AMERICA

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## Busch League of His Own

After branching out, the drag actor eyes a return to gown theater

IF SOMEBODY WANTS TO write an essay on gay sensibility, just study me. I'm it!" says Charles Busch with some of the shameless grandeur you'd expect from the feisty heroines he's created on stage: Just think of the 2,000-year-old diva in *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*; Gertrude Garnet, the Nazi-fighting pianist in *The Lady in Question*; or that notorious *Theodora, She-Bitch of Byzantium*. There's

even a new Busch heroine to be unveiled this fall: the title character in *Queen Amarantha*, who rules her 17th century kingdom clad in men's clothes (think Garbo's Queen Christina).

Busch's brand of theatrical drag follows in the footsteps of the late Charles Ludlam, founder of New York's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which honed camp and cross-dressing into a comic art in the 1960s and '70s. Busch's *Vampire Lesbians*, a silly spoof written for a grungy bar in Manhattan's East Village, took off in 1985, becoming one of the longest-running shows off-Broadway. Busch creates not impersonations of iconic divas (no Judy lip-synching) but full-fledged protagonists in intricate parodies, spun from his encyclopedic knowledge of movie and theater history. "The actresses that I admire were comediennees who were also glamorous, like Lucille Ball or Rosalind Russell," says Busch. "They were these clotheshorses who could also do prat-falls and be outrageous."

And as if to prove that gay sensibility isn't all about men in dresses, Busch's latest incarnation is behind the scenes, writing the new off-Broadway musical *The Green Heart*, which runs through April 20 at the Manhattan Theatre Club. The comedy, which Busch concocted with composer-lyricist Rusty Magee, is about a dissolute playboy who marries an awkward botanist with a huge fortune. Although the tale didn't originate with him—the same story inspired Elaine May's 1970 film *A New Leaf*—Busch says he found a way to weave in one of his familiar themes: "fragmented people gaining a new sense of themselves." Directed by Busch's longtime collaborator Kenneth Elliott, it's a typically wacky Busch affair—a tale of murder and romance filled with offbeat characters and farcical situations.

Busch began diversifying his talents after his subversively hilarious 1991 play, *Red Scare on Sunset*, in which he played Mary Dale, a well-meaning Pollyanna of a Hollywood star who names names at the McCarthy hearings in the 1950s. He surprised everyone by playing a man in his next production, *You Should Be So Lucky*. He then acted in movies and other people's plays and even published a novel, *Whores of Lost Atlantis*, a fictionalized account of *Vampire Lesbians'* success.

But for a time Busch shied away from writing any more diva roles for himself. "I was temporarily confused after *Red Scare* and thought being in drag was a mask that kept me from being more direct with the audience," he says. But while putting the final touches to his script for *The Green Heart*, Busch flexed those drag diva muscles again for a solo off-Broadway show called *Flipping My Wig*, having realized, he says, "My creativity is so definitely filtered through female personae, in a way it's more me."

So now he's raring to go with *Queen Amarantha*: part homage to the theater of Sarah Bernhardt (his lifelong idol), part spoof of Garbo movies ("There'll be those lesbian moments she has with her lady-in-waiting"), and part serious exploration of role-playing. "It's good to stretch and try different things," Busch says, "but now I've got a better sense of what I like to do and what I am best at—and that's being the leading lady in the context of a play. So I'm going back to drag full tilt—and I love it!"

But with Hollywood embracing drag queens and heterosexual sports stars donning dresses, could drag be passé in the late '90s? "That only forces you to rethink it and take it further," counters Busch. So hold on to your wigs, girls. —GERARD RAYMOND

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## Leavitt Alone

Author David Leavitt faces his demons and writes a new book.

SOME PEOPLE THINK David Leavitt has a sex problem—not personally, but as a writer of fiction about gay men. Since the 1984 publication of his acclaimed short story collection *Family Dancing*, gay critics and readers alike have complained that Leavitt is unwilling or unable to deal with gay male sexuality. His stories and novels seem deeply rooted in a nice, upper-middle-class world of mothers, childhood innocence, and clean white jockey shorts. Novelist and critic Felice Picano once went so far as to claim that Leavitt wrote "as though he didn't have a penis."

Leavitt's new collection of three novellas, *Arkansas*, published by Houghton Mifflin in April, should change all that. "The Wooden Anniversary" is an E.M. Forster-esque erotic romp in Tuscany told as a Woody Allen comedy of mis-manners; "Saturn Street" portrays a blocked writer who delivers lunch to and falls in lust with a homebound man with AIDS. In both stories, sexual desire fuels plot and theme. But this is nothing compared with "The Term Paper Artist," in which a novelist named David Leavitt writes term papers for cute straight male undergraduates in exchange for sex. The story was killed from the April *Esquire*, reportedly for its sexual content. Writing without a penis? I don't think so.

"I don't understand how I got this reputation for being hostile to sex in my work," claims Leavitt today. "I've written about sex. *While England Sleeps* was about a sexually obsessive affair. *The Lost Language of Cranes* had lots of sex; it even had a scene where Philip, the main character, shoots his come across the room and it lands, sizzling, on a radiator. I have not shied away from exploring gay sexuality."

So how *did* Leavitt get this serious image problem as the goody-two-shoes of homo fiction? "[It's] a response to how I presented myself to the world," says Leavitt, now 35. "A clean-cut good boy, happy and monogamous with my lover in East Hampton in our cute little country house with our cute little dog. Like many men of my generation, the open sexuality of gay life horrified me." To a gay literary world predicated, to a large degree, upon celebrating sexual extravagance, this attitude seemed, well, like Attitude.

It's hard not to see some envy at work here too. While older writers like Andrew Holleran, Edmund White, and Larry Kramer had, by the late '70s, already published openly gay material with mainstream presses, it was the wunderkind