



BEYOND Ridiculous

Making Gay Theatre with
Charles Busch in 1980s New York

KENNETH ELLIOTT

Beyond **RidicuLous**

**STUDIES IN
THEATRE HISTORY
AND CULTURE**

Heather S. Nathans,
series editor



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in 1980s New York

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For Ren Gong

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
INTRODUCTION: BEYOND RIDICULOUS	1
CHAPTER 1. WOULDN'T IT BE FUN?	9
CHAPTER 2. FANTASY THEATRE	29
CHAPTER 3. OFF BROADWAY	51
CHAPTER 4. MACDOUGAL STREET EMPIRE	73
CHAPTER 5. THE LADY IN QUESTION	98
CHAPTER 6. LIMBO SUNSET	123
CHAPTER 7. BEYOND LIMBO	142
APPENDIX:	
Theatre-in-Limbo New York Production List, 1984–1991	165
Notes	173
Bibliography	181
Index	187

Acknowledgments

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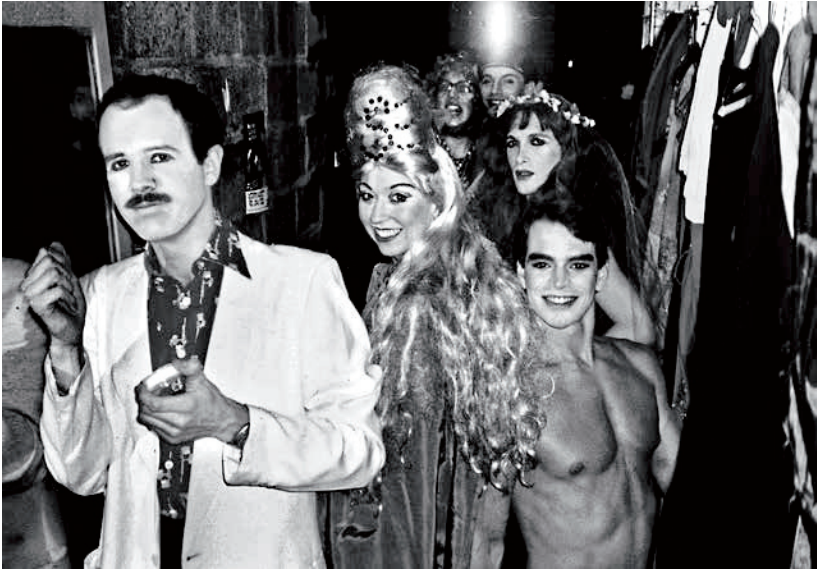
I've relied on Brian Whitehill in many ways since we met in 1984. He designed the sets as well as the posters and advertisements for all of the *Theatre-in-Limbo* productions with style and wit. He has helped me again with this book by coordinating the photographs, some of which he took himself. I'd like to thank all the photographers who contributed to this project. T. L. Boston stage-managed several of our shows and also occasionally served as a production photographer; two of his photographs are in this book. It is always a pleasure to work with the talented Carol Rosegg,

in the studio or on the set. She has long been one of best theatre photographers in the business. One of my favorite backstage photographs, featured in the Introduction, was taken by Andy Halliday. Special thanks to Norbert Sinski for the estate of George Dudley, and Keith Henry for the estate of Marc Raboy, for granting permission to use their wonderful photos.

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I'd like express deep love and appreciation for my late parents, Donald and Dorothy Elliott, who were unfailingly supportive as I labored through graduate school and early versions of this book. I'm sorry they didn't get to see it in print, but they never doubted it would happen. And finally, I'm especially thankful for my beloved partner of ten years, Dr. Shao Gong, better known to friends as Ren.

Introduction **Beyond Ridiculous**



Kenneth Elliott, Julie Halston, Tom Aulino, Arnie Kolodner, Charles Busch, and Robert Carey in the cramped backstage area at Limbo, preparing for a performance of Vampire Lesbians of Sodom. Photo by Andy Halliday.

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Ninth Street between Avenues B and C wasn't the most desolate block in Manhattan's East Village on December 1, 1984, but it was dreary enough—mostly shuttered industrial buildings, a rubble-strewn vacant lot, a few dilapidated apartment houses, and plenty of graffiti. But at around 9:30 that evening, an orderly queue of well-heeled young gay men and a few women began forming at the door of a former sanitation garage in the middle of the block. The only indication that there might be something other than garbage trucks inside was a small sign that read "Limbo." Before long, the line snaked down the block and around the corner, past the bodega on Avenue C. It was the last performance of the year for Theatre-in-Limbo in

our signature production, a drag extravaganza called *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, written by and starring Charles Busch.

Inside the Limbo, a combination art gallery, nightclub, and performance space, I was getting frantic. I was the director and producer of the show, and I was also in the cast. We had been waiting for nearly an hour to begin our setup while a rock band scheduled to perform later that night was completing a sound check. The stage was littered with what looked like hundreds of feet of speaker wire, microphones, amplifiers, and a drum kit. The musicians seemed to have no conception that our show was supposed to start on that very stage in a half hour. As they idly began to clear their equipment, I pointedly glared in their direction while noisily setting up neat rows of white metal folding chairs in front of the stage, sweating, despite the lack of heat in the building, through the heavy stage makeup I always wore when playing the pompous silent screen star King Carlisle. The cast was already getting into costume in the cramped, narrow, alley-like area behind the platform stage. Most of us put on our makeup at home because there were no dressing rooms at the Limbo. There wasn't even a toilet backstage; in case of emergency, the actors had to improvise with cups or soda cans. Our wig designer/stage manager Kathie Carr was giving a last-minute coat of lacquer to one of her outrageous beehive creations. Joe Cote, our production assistant, pulled out a ladder in the midst of the chaos onstage and began hanging our backdrop. The musicians were still sauntering around, unplugging cable and casually chatting amongst themselves, seemingly unaware that they were in the way. Lighting designer Vivien Leone was running a last-minute dimmer check. It was already 9:45, and the show was supposed to start at 10:00. Suddenly, the sound of angry shouting rang out from the back of the room. Vivien had just discovered that the deejay from the previous night's after-hours party had refocused her light plot, and she was giving the house technical director an earful. Kathie dropped her can of hairspray and ran back to the booth to run the board while Vivien scrambled up a ladder to refocus the lights. We would have to hold the curtain, as usual.

Finally, at around 10:15, the stage was set, the lights were refocused, and we were ready to open the house. Marie-Lohr, a beautiful French girl wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a black leather jacket, was stationed at the door ready to collect \$5 from each customer—she was our favorite door person because she was glamorous, with a tough edge, and never let anyone in for free. As the audience filed in, I stood with Marie-Lohr for a few minutes,

and then went out on the street to check out the crowd. I was astonished to see the queue still winding around the block. I ran backstage and told Charles that we had never had a bigger audience. The folding chairs were quickly taken and standees soon filled in any vacant space in the room. The bartender was busy dispensing longneck Rolling Rock beers and mixed drinks in plastic cups from the unlicensed bar. The curtain had to be held as more and more people pushed in. They just kept coming. I always made a practice of shuttling back and forth from backstage to the front door to see how sales were going. That night it took me over five minutes just to cross the room because of the mob scene. As I made my way backstage, I noticed some of the crowd filling in the space behind the bar with the bartender, several were sitting on top of the ice machine, and others were perched on rungs of the ladder leading up to the light booth. The Limbo was packed dangerously beyond its capacity, but there wasn't a certificate of occupancy anyway, and nobody cared. Such laws were casually ignored in the East Village of 1984. When our theme music finally blared from the speakers, the audience roared in recognition. Many of them had seen the show several times. The actors waiting in the wings to go on were thrilled but also slightly frightened. I quipped to Charles that this must have been how the Beatles felt before a concert, on a smaller scale, of course—maybe in Hamburg.

It was electrifying to play for Limbo audiences—like riding a wild wave. They got every joke, appreciated every nuance, and the laughs were huge. At the curtain call that night, our unofficial fan club, a group of young men who called themselves “Charlie’s Angels,” presented flowers to everyone in the cast during the thunderous ovation. The obvious affection that this audience had for the entire company was palpable. Who were they, and why had they come to this converted garage in a marginal neighborhood to see us? Theatre historian Arnold Aronson had attended the previous night’s performance and later analyzed the crowd with anthropological precision for the *Drama Review*:

The audience is primarily gay and conservatively dressed; this is not the East Village Punk scene one sees on the street a block or two away. It is a cult audience familiar with the work of playwright/actor Charles Busch, and with the high-camp style of this company. It is not a “theatre audience”—by and large, these spectators are not familiar with nor interested in the range of avant-garde theatre available

elsewhere in the city. It is a young audience and many are not familiar with the early work of John Vaccaro, Ron Tavel, Charles Ludlam, and Hot Peaches which is a clear precedent for this performance. This is an audience out for simple entertainment.¹

The Limbo audiences did not have to be familiar with the historical precedents of Vaccaro, Tavel, and Ludlam to respond to the specifically gay theatrical style those men helped to create back in the 1960s—a style known as Theatre of the Ridiculous.² Times may have changed, but the Ridiculous Theatre aesthetic still spoke to a young gay audience with little or no knowledge of its provenance. The critical theorist and scholar David M. Halperin observed that “gay culture is not just a superficial affectation. It is an expression of difference through style—a way of carving out space for an alternate way of life. And that means carving out space in opposition to straight society.”³ The Limbo was that kind of space, and Ridiculous Theatre was that kind of style. Aronson calls it “high camp.” Volumes have been written on this subject since the publication of Susan Sontag’s 1964 essay “Notes on Camp,” and it is a hotly contested term, but it’s not something we thought much about at the time, and we weren’t concerned with its political ramification.⁴ For us, camp mostly meant embracing and exaggerating for effect the highly theatrical performance style of 1930s and ’40s film stars, with occasional anachronisms, such as an ancient Roman guard with a New Jersey accent or a Byzantine empress who sends her robes to the local dry cleaner.

Charles Busch, a college friend, introduced me to Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company soon after I moved to New York, and we saw nearly every show they produced from 1980 on. We often stopped backstage to chat with Ludlam and members of the cast after performances. Ludlam’s brilliant comic turns were hilarious, and I was well aware that Theatre-in-Limbo owed a huge debt to him. But like the young audience described by Aronson, I was unfamiliar with his early work, or that of other artists who had developed the Ridiculous aesthetic decades earlier. It wasn’t until my doctoral studies at UCLA, many years later, that I gained a deep understanding of the origins of the type of theatre the Ridiculous Theatrical Company performed and discovered a number of excellent books and articles on the subject.⁵ For readers unacquainted with the early Ridiculous Theatre, as I was, I will attempt to sketch a brief history.

The Ridiculous was avant-garde theatre born in the rebellious 1960s.

Although Ludlam later objected to being identified as avant-garde, the earliest Ridiculous Theatre most definitely fit the bill: it was a direct assault on straight, mainstream values. It wasn't necessarily concerned with gay subjects; it was a gay *aesthetic*. Not to be confused with the stark, existentially angst-ridden Theatre of the Absurd, Ridiculous Theatre was outrageous and over the top. It mocked conventional values and pretenses and undermined traditional gender roles and political categories to expose what Stefan Brecht (son of playwright Bertolt Brecht) described as "the utter ridiculousness of institutionalized society."⁶ It did so by parodying high and low literary and theatrical forms of the past, especially pop culture. Everything from Christopher Marlowe to Maria Montez movies to *I Love Lucy* could be recycled into the Ridiculous. It was a non-illusionistic, presentational performance style defined by camp, cheap theatrics, the grotesque, sexual ambiguity, and gender-blurring drag performances.

The elements of what would become the aesthetic of Ridiculous Theatre crystalized in the work of Jack Smith (1932–1989), a photographer, filmmaker, and performance artist whom Ludlam would later call "the daddy of us all."⁷ Smith developed a philosophy of rebellion against the dominant culture that gave weight to his aesthetic. Rage, based on alienation from postwar mainstream American culture, was what motivated him. He wasn't a playwright in the traditional sense, nor did he regularly produce, direct, or act on the stage. He rejected commercialism so effectively that relatively few people actually saw his work. His most celebrated achievement, the 1963 film *Flaming Creatures*, was banned in New York and twenty-one other states. And yet Smith was influential to such disparate artists as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Federico Fellini, and Andy Warhol. Foreman described his first encounter with *Flaming Creatures* as "the most overwhelming aesthetic experience of my life."⁸ Aronson calls him "the lynchpin of the avant-garde."⁹ Smith used drag, a staple of gay performance for generations, in a new way: as a critique of gender stereotypes. His flaming creatures intentionally blurred the differences between male and female rather than exaggerating them. He found value in pop culture rejects, such as the B movie goddess Maria Montez, that were regarded as kitsch by high-brow critics. He took what was considered trash and turned it into art. This was his "moldy aesthetic," and it became the basis for Ridiculous Theatre.

The stage history of Ridiculous Theatre began with playwright Ronald Tavel (1936–2009), a screenwriter for Andy Warhol's films, and director John Vaccaro (1929–2016). They founded the Play-House of the Ridiculous

in 1965, and their first collaboration was produced way Off Broadway in a gallery called the Coda, which specialized in psychedelic art. Both men were greatly influenced by Smith, but whereas Tavel's inclination was to develop a highly intellectual, text-based theatre (his plays are larded with bad puns and malapropisms, often with sexual connotations), Vaccaro's interest was in manic, over-the-top staging that he called "orgiastic."¹⁰ Their collaboration didn't last long, but it lasted long enough to launch the career of a young Charles Ludlam (1943–1987), who began his career as a scene-stealing actor in a Play-House production, *The Life of Lady Godiva* (1966). He soon broke away to start his own company, where he was playwright, director, and star, and he proceeded to thoroughly transform Ridiculous Theatre during the course of his career.

Smith, Tavel, and Vaccaro had created nonlinear performance events that owed as much to 1960s Happenings as they did to traditional theatre. Ludlam's earliest work was very much a part of that tradition, but beginning with *Bluebeard* (1970), his plays were often in more traditional and accessible forms, such as the well-made play. Many of them earned high praise from the *New York Times*. His adaptation of *Camille* (1973) was a huge hit, and his performance as the consumptive courtesan Marguerite Gautier is legendary. The plunging neckline of his costume revealed his hairy chest, both referencing and making a mockery of the elegant gowns Adrian had designed for Garbo to wear in the 1936 MGM film version; at the same time, Ludlam demonstrated a reverence for his source material by playing key emotional scenes with complete earnestness. It was a delicate balancing act that delighted his gay audiences. He had his biggest success in 1984 with *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, and there was much talk that he was entering the mainstream. But while he sought to "win converts"¹¹ and expand the audience for the Ridiculous, Ludlam kept his company very much at arm's length from mainstream commercial theater.

Charles Busch and I thought Theatre-in-Limbo was about as far from the mainstream theatre of the time as you could get when we were starting out in 1984. We were a gay company with little experience and no connections to speak of, and our leading lady was a man. Yet over the course of seven years, five Theatre-in-Limbo productions transferred to commercial Off-Broadway runs, and the most successful of them ran for five years and became the longest-running nonmusical Off-Broadway production in history. Since those days, Charles has become a beloved establishment figure of New York theatre. He was nominated for a 2001 Tony Award for his hit

Broadway comedy, *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*. He was even named an "Off-Broadway Legend" in 2011 by the Off-Broadway Alliance, an industry trade group. The perception of assimilation into the cultural mainstream may explain why Theatre-in-Limbo is often left out of overviews of gay, avant-garde, and Off-Off-Broadway theatre of the period, and why there are so few published accounts of its history. Some East Village performance artists felt we were interlopers from the West Village, and Charles's early plays are often viewed as lightweight commercial comedies, yet our productions were regarded as oddities by the commercial theatre community. We didn't fit comfortably into any category. Theatre-in-Limbo occupied a uniquely liminal space between the avant-garde and the establishment while belonging to neither.

The world was very different in December 1984 when we were performing *Vampire Lesbians* at the Limbo Lounge than it had been nearly twenty years earlier when the first Ridiculous Theatre performances took place. The protest movements of the 1960s, the sexual revolution, the Vietnam War, the Stonewall rebellion, disco, Watergate, and Carter's malaise were all water under the bridge. Although progress had been made on gay rights, major challenges for the LGBTQ community remained. We were in the midst of the Reagan revolution, and the sunny geniality of the president masked the ascendance of his racist, homophobic, anti-feminist supporters such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell and the "Moral Majority." Most important, the relentless tragedy of AIDS was well underway, and it had altered the landscape for gay Americans and how we were perceived by the mainstream.

The decade of the 1980s was a transitional period for New York theatre. Production on Broadway was sharply curtailed from its heyday. Only ten new American plays opened on Broadway in the 1984–85 season, compared to twenty-one in the 1969–70 season just fifteen years earlier—a 50 percent reduction. Times Square was a place to be avoided, not a tourist destination. Some Broadway houses remained dark for the entire season, even after two historic theatres, the Morosco and the Helen Hayes, had been demolished to make way for the ghastly Marriott Marquis Hotel—a harbinger of the Times Square to come. Homeless men and women often slept in the doorways of vacant theatres.

It was a dreary and dispiriting time in New York. Like many young hopefuls, Charles and I had come to the city to start careers in a theatre that seemed to be dying on the vine. We found ourselves thwarted at every turn

until Theatre-in-Limbo changed our lives. Charles often refers to himself as an anecdotist, and he likes to frame the Theatre-in-Limbo story as a fairy tale. That evening in 1984, the sudden and improbable success of *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* certainly felt like one. But of course, it's not that simple. To explore the context and complications of our story, this book draws upon primary and secondary sources, documents, and interviews; however, it is also a memoir of my friendship and collaboration with Charles Busch. While I don't have the critical distance of an objective historian or theorist, I hope to show how central theatre was to at least part of the gay community as the AIDS epidemic took its deadly toll. I'll tell a firsthand history of our company, marked by heady triumphs and devastating tragedy, as a reflection of a pivotal period in New York history, and of a lost theatrical world.