Charles Ludlam Lives!

Edgecomb, Sean

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ACT II

The Post-Ludlam/Neo-Ridiculous
Chapter Two

Charles Busch

More Excitement! More Glamour! More Wigs!

“Life isn’t an old movie.” Oh yeah? Maybe not a feature, but this adventure was most definitely made for TV. It seemed only natural that I should view life as a celluloid fantasy.

—Charles Busch

Prologue

This first case study focuses on Ludlam’s continuing influence during the East Village Renaissance in the 1980s and the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on the gay community. It unpacks the phenomena of queer legacies that are passed interpersonally and through direct contact, whether vocational, amicable, or sexual. Tied to Ludlam in time and place, Charles Busch’s approach to the neo-Ridiculous closely embodies Dinshaw’s idea of touch.¹ Touch is a framework with which to create a constellation of individuals that collectively fall under the category of Halberstam’s queer subjects, linking the notion of physical/affective touch with a kind of queer subjectivity that informs both the performance of Busch and its reception.² Thus, in this formula of touch, or queer contact, Busch becomes a physical marker of the past verging with the present. This embodiment is magnified by Busch’s tendency to play his roles through the character of an aging grande dame modeled on nineteenth-century divas, a poor man’s Sarah Bernhardt. Busch performs as his own unique manifestation of Bernhardt as a particular character in each of his plays.

Referring to Ernst Bloch’s theory of escapism, this chapter deconstructs the period’s reinterpretation of the Ridiculous genre as a source for communality and solace by examining the work and texts of John Kelly
and the interloper status of Busch. Busch achieved his own notoriety in the Off-Broadway theater scene by unapologetically appropriating, revising, and mainstreaming the conventions of the Ridiculous genre. He achieved success by snatching the genre from the affluent West Village ruled by Ludlam and his Ridiculous Theatrical Company (RTC) and moving it across the island, dropping it in a condemned antiestablishment club called the Limbo Lounge in the midst of the decaying East Village. The transplanting of a new form of the Ridiculous in the East Village resulted in a kind of “multiplicity” as introduced by Dolan, setting up a queer geography that refracted and shifted what the RTC had started at Sheridan Square, though admittedly much to Ludlam’s chagrin.3 Whereas Ludlam had risen to fame and achieved popular and critical success with the RTC in reaction to the Stonewall/post-Stonewall era of gay liberation and sexual freedom, Busch was propelled by the desire to create a nineteenth-century touring “stock” company; a nostalgic construct intended to whisk the often chronically ill audience to a simpler time. It also demonstrates how Busch successfully extended his theater beyond its early association with the AIDS crisis—taking his own legacy proverbially by the horns.

Busch’s neo-Ridiculous originated in a particular time and moment and in what Halberstam deems the legacy-building “in between space,” taking shape in the abandoned refuse of the culturally liminal East Village, particularly in his early plays, such as Vampire Lesbians of Sodom and Sleeping Beauty or Coma.4 Regardless of its physical location, however, Busch unknowingly helped to create an example of Muñoz’s “alternative chain of belonging” that was soldered through disease, fear, and empathy as much as sexual desire and identity.5 The development of muscle culture (sthenolagnia) and the infected body in Ridiculous performance is also unpacked by considering the cultural semiotics of AIDS in context to the vampire as an apocalyptic figure, as suggested by conservative fundamentalist Christian groups. It also calls upon Román’s deconstruction of the “false binary between art and politics,” in order to shed light on Busch’s sociopolitical relevance in light of his apolitical intent.6 The notion of the apolitical is ironically magnified through Busch’s descent into a Ridiculous historification of the past in his Red Scare on Sunset, a play that hilariously critiques the communist witch hunts in McCarthy-era Hollywood, the apolitical driven by the irreverent deconstruction of the distinctly political. Moreover, the apolitical becomes politically charged through the appearance of HIV-positive bodies presented on the stage.

The chapter continues to examine Busch’s later, more sophisticated
plays and films, including *Die Mommie, Die!* and *The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife*, representative of the playwright’s tendency to switch between plays loosely inspired either by old Hollywood glamor or by urban Jewish-American nostalgia.

**Interpersonal Origins**

In 1984, the same year that Charles Ludlam’s play *The Mystery of Irma Vep* opened to critical acclaim (arguably marking the zenith of his artistic career), a failing, starry-eyed solo performer and Ridiculous acolyte named Charles Busch abandoned his one-man show to form his own troupe: Theatre-in-Limbo. Busch achieved his own notoriety in the Off-Broadway theater scene by unapologetically appropriating and revising the conven-

![Figure 4: Charles Busch as Judith of Bethulia in the play of the same name (2012). Photographer: David Rodgers.](image)
tions of the Ridiculous theater. In structuring this chapter as a narrative that weaves together different perspectives of the same period (with much of the information drawn from original interviews), it takes on an affective lens, what Ann Cvetkovich terms “an archive of feelings” taking into consideration often less than objective responses to Busch’s work. Busch’s queer legacy begins interpersonally: he knew and worked with Charles Ludlam. Busch achieved success, however, by carrying the genre, from the affluent West Village ruled by Ludlam and his Ridiculous Theatrical Company (RTC), to a condemned antiestablishment club called the Limbo Lounge in the midst of the decaying East Village. Whereas Ludlam had risen to fame and achieved popular and critical success with the RTC in reaction to the Stonewall/post-Stonewall era of gay liberation and sexual freedom in the 1970s, Busch would extend the Ridiculous tradition into a new era by providing a temporary escape from Manhattan’s changing culture of poverty and HIV/AIDS after 1981.

This chapter reconsiders Busch’s earlier drag work from the mid-1970s in Chicago and his post-Ludlam work after Theatre-in-Limbo had dissolved in 1991 due to creative differences and the AIDS-related deaths of original company members Robert Carey and Meghan Robinson. Finally, it analyzes the acceptance of Busch’s work into mainstream American theater and film culture. Of all the artists analyzed in this book, Busch best represents the transition that bridges Ludlam’s performances with the RTC to the post-Ludlam Ridiculous that thrives in the downtown art scene of New York today. Although Busch’s playwriting and performance styles intentionally stray from the social commentary that Ludlam and his contemporaries had introduced, he is the linchpin that held together the remnants of the Ridiculous in a time of crisis, allowing the genre to reform as a queer theater of activism and elitism in the late 1990s. Unlike the current generation of Ridiculous artists who were exposed to the Ridiculous genre through academic study or the trickle-down effect of post-1987 performers, Busch became versed in Ludlam’s unique style and purpose because he knew him personally.

Neo-Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch defined escapism as a catalyst for social change. In providing a temporary diversion from a reality created by a rational and technologically advancing society, Bloch saw escapism as “an immature, but honest substitute for revolution.” In Busch’s era escapism became a self-protective mode for collective agency from the outside in, because the group (in this case gay men at the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis) were stigmatized by AIDS phobia and paralyzed by a
sense of fear-propagated vulnerability. The concept of escapism has been associated with the Ridiculous genre since Jack Smith and Ronald Tavel first invented the genre in the early 1960s. Of this, Tavel wrote, “The escapism [of the Ridiculous Theatre] is of a timeless, universal sort, which is why it was so readily encased in timeless fairy tales.” The role of escapism differs between the early Ridiculous and that of Busch because of the shifts in the sociological context of gay life in the United States. The decade between 1980 and 1990 marked a dark time for the gay community as AIDS took its toll, claiming the lives of thousands. The New York Times first reported on the disease in 1981 and just three years later the metropolis reported the highest population of individuals with AIDS, marking it the failing heart of the epidemic.

AIDS came on insidiously and swiftly, simultaneously occurring with the East Village Renaissance and hitting the theater community especially hard, spreading fear and uncertainty across the urban gay population. The promiscuous sex that had marked the previous decade came to a halt as bathhouses and sexual emporiums across the city were boarded up, and individuals (particularly gay men) sought to fill their time with emotional support, solace, and a renewed cohesive and unifying spirit. Busch’s theater became a safe haven for the gay community and beyond, where the Blochian “revolution” became the practical act of giving a survivalist visibility to the disease, both in the audience and on the stage. Original troupe member and Busch scholar Kenneth Elliott corroborates this: “Theatre-in-Limbo began performing in 1984 as the AIDS crisis was escalating. Our ‘primarily gay’ audience craved ‘simple entertainment’ as an escape from this relentless tragedy. Busch seized the moment by providing it.” As Román notes, almost an entire generation of the American theater succumbed to AIDS in the 1980s (including Charles Ludlam), lending Busch the important status of a firsthand observer and oral archivist of a contextual history that otherwise might be lost, forgotten, or misunderstood. Although Busch’s take on the Ridiculous theater was not interventionist, it did become a site of performative resistance. In this sense, Busch’s theater is rendered queerer through its ambivalence—its refusal to be categorized. It becomes politicized through reparative analysis, though its original mission is far from grassroots. In both text and performance Busch’s early work provides an important contemporary reflection of 1980s and can be read as a performance-based cultural time line that inadvertently traces changes in gay American life over the past two decades.
In Limbo

From whence does Busch’s legacy originate? The escapist quality and simplistic construction of Busch’s early plays is pre-Ludlam and reminiscent of Ronald Tavel, playwright and founder of the Playhouse of the Ridiculous. Tavel worked as a filmmaker with Andy Warhol and the Factory before turning his creative energy to theater in 1966. His early plays The Life of Juanita Castro and Shower were written as screenplays, but Tavel transformed them into short plays for the stage when Warhol rejected him for newer, younger, and more easily controlled artists. In forming the PHR troupe with John Vaccaro, Tavel began composing camp follies or pastiched plays such as The Life of Lady Godiva and Gorilla Queen. Of his work Bonnie Marranca notes, “Tavel revels in sexual wordplay (most often generating sexual imagery).” It was these early plays that set in motion the Ridiculous spirit and sensibility that Ludlam would perfect and Busch would appropriate.

Whereas the production of Tavel’s plays provided a meeting space that foreshadowed the explosion of the gay sexual revolution, Busch’s inhabit a safe space that marks the end of a visible gay brotherhood that had been expressed through promiscuous sexual activity. In the late 1960s the Playhouse of the Ridiculous became a covert fraternity where the lines between audience and actors were blurred. Within this space gay men and their friends openly celebrated with free love and mind-enhancing drugs while also inadvertently sowing the seeds (and I fully embrace the double entendre) of a united front that would become the watershed of the Stonewall Riots. Thus, Tavel and Busch are Ridiculous bookends to the period of New York’s gay history between the foundation of the gay rights movement and the AIDS epidemic. Tavel’s escapism was built on a foundation of hope, whereas Busch’s attempt was claimed by the attendant audience to combat a widespread stigmatization of the gay community and subsequent feeling of scapegoating and isolationism.

It is essential to note that the initial development of Busch’s theatrical vision grew out of a personal curiosity and was neither a reaction to the AIDS crisis nor an act of performative intervention. Theatre-in-Limbo came about within a certain time when it was supported and claimed by a gay community that was suffering from the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS, consumed by inexplicable and seemingly unpreventable premature death. First and foremost the theater genre was gay in its legacy, thematic choices, and aesthetic. It was even more so because Busch and the major-
Revised Pages

Charles Busch

ity of the actors in the company were living openly gay lives. Because a large portion of the audience identified themselves as gay or bisexual and had been building a community by living in the midst of the city that had promulgated Stonewall fifteen years earlier, their affinity for Busch bonded them and their concerns as a disenfranchised whole. The support and companionship derived from the attendance of social gatherings such as Theatre-in-Limbo’s late-night soirees tangibly constructed what anthropologist Benedict Anderson refers to as an “imagined community.”Busch created this escapist space by continuing the Ridiculous tradition of creating a community through a theater encoded with exclusive language and symbols intended for a gay reception—Camp—and in this instance an audience impacted by the horrors of the AIDS epidemic. Busch’s created space hovers ambivalently between what Mary Bernstein refers to as distinctive modes of “celebration,” and “suppression” in a period when the gay community was forced to take a backwards step in the dour Lenten period that followed the queer carnival of the 1970s. The support and companionship derived from the attendance at social gatherings such as Theatre-in-Limbo’s late night formed a geist that Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier title “we-ness,” in other words a twofold exchange that essentially erased the stage’s fourth wall and allowed for human contact, both physical and emotional. Gregg Bordowitz (whose memoir, The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous, was inspired directly by Ludlam) notes that the early years of AIDS manifested as a lens that the gay community focused to create new timely art that balanced “youthful exuberance [with a] palpable sense of fear.” This mode of creativity, linked to survival, stood in counterpoint to the incomprehensible weight of the AIDS crisis as a shroud draped over gay identity at large. Although Ludlam largely avoided discussing HIV/AIDS in his essays, and never announced his status publicly, in his final essay, entitled “Politics,” he warns of the effect of the disease on the arts, writing, “Unfortunately, American society, and maybe all societies, can’t cope with real problems like [AIDS] . . . it’s sad that we’ve had to go back to the nineteenth century, when syphilis was a deadly disease and people couldn’t be as free as they once had been.” Busch’s theater (as well as other gay companies working during the period) was made a part of this larger subcultural body politic through association, using Camp to create “a world in which the real becomes unreal, the threatening, unthreatening.” Andrew Holleran refers to the act as a shift in consciousness where “two identities which are most often separated in time and place, merg[ed]: homosexual and American.”
Busch’s Theatre-in-Limbo troupe was formed not to criticize the social injustices of Regan-era America (particularly around HIV/AIDS), but rather to provide a few hours of fun and entertainment for an audience whose lives revolved around a melancholic uncertainty. Busch recollects of his first production:

For a long time I was embarrassed by what I considered to be the flimsiness of *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*. Rereading it recently, I was struck by how entertaining a little sketch it is. Never meant to be considered a play at all, this little decadent dream achieved its goals quite well. It was created merely to entertain a late night crowd on a hot summer night in the East Village. The crazy miracle is that the play has had such an incredibly long life.22

Busch’s plays served as an influential step in “the assimilation of Ridiculous Theatre into mainstream culture.”23 Whereas Ludlam’s revolutionary plays were infamous for an intricately pastiched recipe that mixed (low) pop culture and an (high) academic ethos, Busch’s original plays operate on a shallower level, satirizing familiar stories and cinematic situations on a fantastical plane with no concern for high-brow humor based on obscure intellectual references. Laurence Senelick refers to Busch’s performances as “a high-spirited game of *Trivia*,” suggesting that the plays serve to act as diversion from reality in the same way that leisurely parlor games provide escape from boredom in the guise of lively entertainment.24 Elliott recalls that Busch’s early productions were “like festive parties for the audience and actors alike.”25 While this comparison is acute in its explanation of how Busch’s Ridiculous functions, it is essential to point out that its social relevance at the time of creation supersedes any literary merit. Furthermore, the larger whole of Busch’s pre-Limbo and post-Limbo plays is far more complex and sophisticated than tongue-in-cheek works such as *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* (1984) (inspired in part by Anne Rice’s popular novel *Interview with the Vampire* [1976]) and *Theodora, She-Bitch of Byzantium* (1985) (liberally drawn from Victorien Sardou’s *Theodora* [1884]).

*Low-Rent/High(ish) Art*

Busch’s commercial success was supported by the fetishism of East Village culture as Manhattan’s uptown elite flocked to Alphabet City and subse-
quently approved it. Simply stated, Theatre-in-Limbo conveniently developed in the right place at the right time. In Cynthia Carr’s 1984 essay “The Hot Bottom: Art and Artifice in the East Village,” the author dissects the phenomenon of this period, where the energy that was inherent in the radical creativity of East Village artists (like Busch) was essentially commodified by the wealthy uptown Manhattan gentry through the act of purchasing art and the patronage of avant-garde theater and performance art (which, as in the case of Busch, was often performed in gallery spaces that re-opened as clubs at night).\(^{26}\) Carr suggests, “The highly publicized ‘energy’ of the scene feels something like gold rush fever.”\(^{27}\) Formerly a place to be avoided if not completely ignored, the East Village became a cultural fad as the new avant-garde quarter of New York. Elliott recalls, “It was not unusual to see limousines parked in front of storefront clubs and galleries on otherwise burned-out blocks.”\(^{28}\) The low rents that initially attracted the artists to the once crime-ridden area soon skyrocketed as real estate followed the booming trend that the art community had unconsciously created. Though Busch’s success was assisted by Theatre-in-Limbo’s original East Village location, unlike other performers who had lived bohemian lifestyles in the condemned lofts of Alphabet City and created the radical, irreverent, and often drug-induced impulse that defined the neighborhood aesthetic from within, Busch infiltrated an already vibrant area with a different aesthetic that was more West Village with a pinch of Broadway showmanship. Busch describes himself as an “outsider” in the East Village scene and recalls that he and his troupe would quickly retreat back to their favorite haunt, a theater bar called McBell’s on Washington and Sixth in their home turf of the West Village.\(^{29}\) Busch remarks, “I was attracted to the decadence of the thing, but didn’t really pursue it.”\(^{30}\) Busch’s position in between the East and West Villages is demonstrative (both geographically and artistically) of his ambivalent position and refusal to choose a singular identity for his post-Ludlam Ridiculous and example of the complex nature of queer performance and its resultant legacies.

**Kelly Green with Envy**

Busch’s interloper status is reflected in the opinions of the more hardcore East Village artists such as Busch’s contemporary John Kelly, another revisionist Ridiculous performer and celebrated occasional drag artist. Kelly suggests:
The more edgy [East Village] people, unless they did something kind of mainstream, kind of remained underground. Charles Busch did not come from the East Village aesthetic, he came from the Broadway aesthetic in via the West Village. When he came over to Limbo he was really an outsider and he was using the East Village in a perfectly fine way but he was not spawned from the East Village scene, he was spawned from the commercial theatre. He did it incredibly, he had incredible production values and it was great work, but it wasn't really indigenous to the East Village DNA.31

Kelly, a classically trained ballet dancer, visual artist, choreographer, and countertenor, is best known for his drag performances as Dagmar Onassis (the mythical lost child of Aristotle Onassis and Maria Callas). Kelly has been unfairly labeled (like Ludlam) merely a solo drag act when in fact his original and complex male personas outnumber his female characters. Although Kelly's work has a strong tie to Ludlam's in its irreverent impulses, dedication to craft, and inspiration drawn from classical disciplines, Kelly considers his primary juvenile inspiration to be the Cockettes, a notorious San Francisco–based drag troupe. Kelly's acknowledgment of the Cockettes as an inspiration is compelling, particularly because he also performed with the Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet, a direct offshoot of Ludlam's troupe and founded by RTC members Larry Ree, Richard Goldberger, and Lohr Wilson in 1972.

Kelly first saw the Cockettes in a production of Pearls over Shanghai while still in high school when they played New York's Anderson Theatre during a 1972 tour. Kelly was inspired by the raucous company's fluid genderfuck aesthetic that negated the myopically traditional “man masquerading as woman” form of drag. Kelly remarks,

In a way the drag impulse is a great impulse, it's the impulse to basically be irreverent and to transcend and be extravagant with gesture, but it's not necessarily about male becoming female or female becoming male. The Cockettes were totally genderfuck, and it changed my life. It wasn't the female thing at all, believe me, they had beards, they didn't have tits, some were painted gold—it was total genderfuck. It was basically taking cultural information and amplifying it and fucking with it. And basically shoving up your finger to the culture and saying “No! Let's do this instead.” That version of drag I'm alternately all for. But when drag went mainstream it diminished it and made it kind of stupid.32
It should be noted that Kelly’s enthusiastic response to the Cockettes’ New York performances stands in opposition to the general reception of the visiting troupe. Though the Cockettes had gained a cult celebrity status across the country after their spoof film of Trisha Nixon’s wedding was released in 1971, the Manhattan audience, who had become accustomed to Ludlam’s sophisticated and multilayered pastiched texts and rehearsed performances found the troupe’s disorganized spontaneity infantile and pedestrian in comparison. What played well to the post-Summer of Love audiences in the City by the Bay had no footing at the advent of New York’s disco age. In counterpoint, though the failure of the Cockettes’ Manhattan run is often attributed to their amateurish style, it more than likely was a case of regional taste and loyalty. By 1972 Ludlam had gained a cult following and growing celebrity within Manhattan, perhaps making the Cockettes widely publicized tour destined to fail.

In addition to his classical training at the American Ballet School, Harkness House, the Fashion Institute of Technology, and Parsons throughout the 1970s, Kelly developed a skill set in working with various professional artists. Kelly’s performance career originated at the height of the post-Stonewall sexual revolution, and he became a regular at the East Village’s slew of hardcore (yet inclusive) gay bars and clubs. It was at the S & M leather bar The Anvil in 1979 that Kelly first performed as his “alter ego” Dagmar to popular success after finding inspiration in resident drag queen Tanya Ransom, who regularly lip-synched to Nina Hagen. Over the next ten years Kelly would become a headliner as Dagmar at the popular Pyramid Club and develop a legitimate biography for the character, adding authenticity to the fantasy by “being photographed for the Style section of the New York Times [and] entering or leaving fashionable clubs in ‘full dress’ on the arms of handsome escorts.” Kelly continued to develop the queer fiction of Dagmar creatively with drag-on-drag metatheatrical layering, appearing as Dagmar masquerading as other characters: Dagmar as Joni Mitchell, Dagmar as Mr. Butch from Teaneck, New Jersey, or even Dagmar as Callas herself. This act practically represented Judith Butler’s theory of drag as a self-conscious expression of desire-induced fluid gender in the decade before she concretely set her theories down in print in the watershed Gender Trouble (1990). Kelly’s metamorphic drag maintains the Ridiculous affinity for the cult of the diva, as discussed in the introduction, but it is also a highly academic approach that seeks to complicate and erase gender binaries rather than validating them. Senelick orients Kelly’s
anarchic drag with queer activism, noting that he and his East Village peers “have read all the feminist and queer theory, bone up on hagiography, and perform in a postmodern manner with quotation marks around their drag.” Kelly’s fractured filtering of celebrity through his stage-worthy self as Dagmar as whomever (Mitchell, Callas, etc.) illuminates the commodification of gendering as a form of cultural capital by embodying genderfuck through performative layering. Rather than using a hodgepodge of gender specific signifiers, as favored by Ludlam and the Cockettes, Kelly preserves a state of transparency in his drag that allows the viewer to see the characters lurking just beneath the surface: Dagmar beneath Mitchell and Kelly beneath Dagmar. This effectively destabilizes the symbolic order of gendering, embodying what Stephen Whittle called “a full frontal . . . practical attack on the dimorphism of gender and sex roles.”

Having gained a cult following with his Dagmar act, Kelly began to experiment with a series of diverse yet iconic gay male personae such as Orpheus, Narcissus, Leonardo da Vinci, and Saint Sebastian, using the neoclassical Wilhelm von Gloeden–inspired tableau vivant as medium to draw upon a masculine beauty that was frequently celebrated and coyly discussed by critics. Kelly sees himself as a “chameleon” that loves to “inhabit technique without being shackled by it [as well as] existing in shapes that are decided on and reliable [before] transcending them.” This approach has led to a remarkably diverse gallery of characters over his lengthy career.

From his initial solo performances Kelly began to develop larger and more intricate multimedia shows just as Busch and his troupe began to gain prominence. These highly cerebral shows included Go West Junger Man (1985), a dance narrative about Waldemar Dix, a young East German graffiti artist; Diary of a Somnambulist (1986), inspired by early twentieth-century German Expressionist films; and Pass the Blutwurst, Bitte (1986–87), the visual diary of neo-Expressionist artist Egon Schiele, for which Kelly was awarded his first Obie. Wishing to return to his roots as a classical dancer, Kelly also joined the all-male Trockadero Gloxinia Ballet (founded by former RTC troupe member Larry Ree [Ekathrina Sobechanskaya] in 1972) and was able to perform some of the most iconic women’s roles in tutu and en pointe. Throughout the 1990s he also continued to develop a broad range of solo and group work. Kelly developed a working relationship with Harvard University and the American Repertory Theatre, where he played Cupid in Neil Bartlett’s production of Marlowe’s
Charles Busch  59

*Dido Queen of Carthage* (2005) and appeared in dual roles as John/Persephone in the world premiere of Rinde Eckert, Denise Marika, and Robert Woodruff’s collaborative retelling of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth *Orpheus X* (2006) prior to its run in Edinburgh (2007). Kelly is also committed to recording his performance inspired by Caravaggio in video and still images with *Carav(i)aggio* (2007) as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. With this process he attempted to technologically preserve his work for posterity in order to combat its ephemeral nature and what he terms “rampant cultural amnesia.” In an effort to “galvanize” his work in order to leave “some kind of tangible object to the world” that on some level may be considered if not comprehended by the average person, Kelly has been tirelessly creating an online video library of his complete works on YouTube and following the trend of creating a personal web page. Thikelly's queer legacy veers into the posthuman, a record of oral histories made digital and accessible beyond the ephemeral nature of live performance.

Kelly’s most recent works include *Paved-Paradise Redux*, an updated homage to Joni Mitchell (2007–10), *Cohesion*, a movement-based performance, *Muse Ascending a Staircase*, a multimedia exhibition (2011), *Beauty Kills Me*, a recording (2014), and *Escape Artist Redux*, a performance and video installation based on a graphic novel (2011–14). Kelly has also resurrected productions of *Diary of a Somnambulist* and *Love of a Poet* (both 2015). A regular feature at Bard College’s Live Arts, curated by Gideon Lester, Kelly is also developing *Memoir*, a performance of legacy and his personal journey drawn from his journals, no doubt an important contribution to both queer history-making and a performative record of his own distinct queer legacy.

Unlike Busch, whose brief stint at the Limbo Lounge in the East Village lasted less than a year before he was catapulted to a producer-based Off-Broadway format, Kelly continued to produce work in the same grant-dependent bohemian style, long after the downtown renaissance had been snuffed out by rampant gentrification. Furthermore, performance artists like Kelly were struck a hard blow in 1990 when the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) chairman, John Frohnmayer, was pressured by the conservative administration of George H. W. Bush and vetoed the grants of four artists because of the sexual themes in their work, even though they had been previously selected and approved after a peer review. The four artists, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes, Tim Miller, and John Fleck, were labeled the “NEA Four.” Although the artists appealed the case to the U.S.
Supreme Court in *National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley* (1993), in turn winning a settlement in the same amount as the revoked grants, the NEA buckled under pressure from Congress, ceasing all grants awarded to individuals thereafter. Sixteen years after this landmark change Kelly is discouraged by the state of the arts in the United States. Kelly says, “Culturally it’s more about finances and practicality at this point, although there are certain cultural issues that I would dwell on in my work, and really I’m working on reconfiguring my process, not so much to adjust to the world, but to adjust to the realities of being in this country and this moment in time.”

Because Busch built his career on a midtown professional model that only borrowed from the East Village aesthetic and hype, he has continued to achieve a financial and popular success in theater and cinema that Kelly has not. Like Kelly, Busch continues to perform in new original theatrical and cinematic works as writer and actor over thirty years after his premiere of *Vampire Lesbians*. This achievement surpasses Ludlam’s incredible run of twenty years with his own ever-changing troupe prior to his AIDS-related death in 1987.

Kelly’s independently developed performance genre is a unique addition to the Ridiculous because it is primarily nonnarrative, relying upon singing (both live and lip-synched), movement, and dance. In this way, his performance must be considered in a different context than either Ludlam’s or Busch’s work because it does not make reference to literature or cinema via dialogue-centered pastiche. Kelly’s work should be analyzed in terms of both dance and performance history. Though the affective connections to New York, Ludlam, and Busch are rife, Kelly also chooses to trace his queer legacy from the Cockettes rather than his Gotham-based contemporaries, opening the possibility of another scholarly project in queer legacy and performance.

_All about Eve_

In an introductory essay that appears in his published collection of plays (2001) Busch remarks, “I was never in a school play, and for good reason: I couldn’t remember a line of dialogue. I nearly hyperventilated the moment I hit the stage. It was because I loved it too much. To be ‘up there’ was almost too magical to imagine.” This expression of youthful reticence is the antithesis of Ludlam’s childhood approach to the theater, which was
reliant on a constant struggle to be the center of attention. Busch’s off-stage persona as a nice Jewish boy from uptown was contradictory to the larger-than-life grandes dames that he presents onstage. Since the early days of the Ridiculous movement its creators have always been dependent upon the establishment and capitalization of commanding and often bizarre personae that blurred the lines between their everyday and performative identities. Ludlam’s command of the stage while in role was in part a reflection of his often difficult and demanding behavior as director and playwright. In counterpoint, Busch’s offstage persona is more wealthy urban gay man than it is contrived eccentric. Though grand and effeminate gestures occasionally color his conversation when off the stage, Busch uses them ironically; he could easily slip into a crowd unnoticed. This desire for anonymity often accompanies commercial success, whereas many contemporary Ridiculous performers such as Justin Vivian Bond and occasionally Taylor Mac blend their stage personae into their everyday life as avant-garde self-promotion. Busch chooses not to appear in drag for public appearances because he desires to be identified as an actor capable of self-transformation rather than a radical drag queen. His freedom to do this is supported by the fact that he has already developed a name for himself that is immediately associated with his successful work in the cultural coteries of New York.

Busch first became aware of Ludlam’s RTC in the early 1970s when he was still a high school student in Manhattan. Afterward he attended productions of *Eunuchs of the Forbidden City* (1971) and *Camille* (1973). Busch’s perception of theater changed completely in watching the reckless abandon that Ludlam encouraged onstage in stark contrast to the Broadway shows that he had regularly attended with his wealthy aunt Lillian. He recalls of these early RTC productions: “It was so decadent, and dangerous, and funny . . . and the whole operatic nineteenth-century feeling of it, yet crossed with the primitive . . . I just was hooked.” In the spring of 1976, Ludlam took his company on a tour of the American Midwest, culminating with a performance and a symposium on the Ridiculous held at the University of Chicago. Busch, who three years before had relocated to the Windy City and was a senior at Northwestern University, attended the symposium followed by a question-and-answer session with Ludlam. There he became acquainted with RTC troupe members George Osterman and John Brockmeyer because, as Busch recollects, he and his best friend Ed Taussig, who accompanied him, were “cute.” Osterman and Brockmeyer invited Busch and Taussig to attend a closing-night party after the
performance of *Stage Blood* that they would be attending that evening. At the play, an undervalued masterpiece based on a meta-metatheatrical retelling of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Chekhov’s *The Seagull*, Busch immediately noticed that a poster for his upcoming play *Sister Act* (about a pair of showgirl Siamese twins trying to separate) that he had presented to Osterman and Ludlam had been posted on the wall of the dressing room set. Encouraged by this generous display and hoping to gain favor with Ludlam before the party, Busch went backstage to help strike the set after the performance. He recollects:

I had this one, very weird, “All About Eve” moment. When we were packing up the costumes, somebody tossed Camille’s ball gown to me; and as I was holding it up, I noticed Charles watching me with this odd look: I put it down very quickly.\(^48\)

Busch’s reference to the Bette Davis star vehicle *All About Eve* (1950) reflects the continuous Ridiculous convention of employing references drawn from an obsession with old Hollywood film stars, and a pastiche of these icons as metaphors for their own lives. This began when Ridiculous forefathers Jack Smith and Ronald Tavel initiated a cult around B movie “Queen of Technicolor” Maria Montez. Of his “patron saint,” Jack Smith said, “[Maria Montez] believed and thereby made the people who went to see her movies believe. Those who could believe did. Those who saw the world’s worst actress couldn’t and they missed the magic.”\(^49\) In much the same way that Busch’s plays would come to represent an escape for the disenfranchised in the mid-1980s, Maria Montez films provided “the escapism of a timeless universal sort” for individuals with a Ridiculous mentality before the Ridiculous movement began.\(^50\) Although he was a generation younger than Smith, Tavel, and Ludlam, Busch also found his inspiration in the films of a bygone era.

In *The Lady in Question Is Charles Busch: A Drag to Riches Story*, John Catania and Charles Ignacio’s 2006 biographical documentary that covers Busch’s life from childhood through the premiere of his film *Die Mommie, Die!* (2003), Busch appears to graduate from college to go on to a solo career before he haphazardly falls into his drag career at the Limbo Lounge in 1984.\(^51\) In reality, Busch had already developed his skills as a drag star with his first acting troupe, the forgotten Imitation of Life Theatre (ILT) in Chicago (1976–78). Encouraged by his introduction to the aesthetic of the RTC and its members, Busch began writing more short plays in the
style of Ludlam. The first, entitled *Old Coozies*, was a parody of the classic film and high-camp gem *Old Acquaintance* (1943), starring Bette Davis and Miriam Hopkins. Billing themselves under the drag pseudonyms, the sisters Elsa and Shatze Van Allen, Busch and Taussig opened at Chicago gay punk bar, La Mère Vipère. Retrospectively Busch realized that *Old Coozies* was in fact “an embryonic version of what would become years later *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom.*” While in a Chicago-based homoerotic production of Sartre’s *The Flies*, Busch met several other young actors who had recently graduated from Northern Illinois University. It was with this group that Busch formed the ILT as a Chicago-based emulation of the RTC, opening with his self-penned production of *Myrtle Pope: The Story of a Woman Possessed* (1977). A pastiche of a “slew of women’s pictures,” *Myrtle Pope* became a cult favorite among audiences, playing in diverse venues including straight and gay bars, bathhouse, and late-night movie theaters across Chicago. While this experience resulted in the honing of Busch’s drag skills, for which he was lauded by Chicago’s gay and countercultural journalists, the troupe dissolved amid feelings of resentment and jealousy as other company members faded before the attention bestowed on their rising star. This is reminiscent of Ludlam’s deliberate choice to surround himself with novice actors to highlight his own acting talent. The frustrating behavior that ended ILT was the catalyst for Busch to work as a solo performer playing multiple characters and genders and informed his decision to return to New York.

The acquaintance of Busch and Ludlam was revived two years later when Busch began performing his solo show *Hollywood Confidential* (1979) in New York. Busch was struck by the difficulty of finding space to perform within the city and was relegated to scrounging for a night at Scene Once, a cabaret space on Hudson Street that “would book just about anybody.” As he was paying his dues as a solo performer trying to make his way in the challenging world of professional theater in Manhattan, Busch became determined to reconnect with an aloof and seemingly unapproachable Ludlam. Since Busch made his acquaintance in Chicago, Ludlam’s star continued to rise: he found a permanent home for the RTC at One Sheridan Square in the West Village and continued to be the toast of the downtown theater scene, balancing now classic and new productions in repertory. In an attempt to gain Ludlam’s attention (and hopefully his audience) Busch plastered the RTC theater with flyers after running into RTC company member Black-Eyed Susan (Susan Carlson) on the street. Carlson was a longtime RTC member who initially met Ludlam
while they were undergrads at Hofstra and would remain a member of
the company until Ludlam’s death. Fortuitously, Ludlam saw a flyer and
attended an evening of Busch’s show, but much to Busch’s chagrin Ludlam
and his partner and fellow RTC member Everett Quinton left without go-
ing backstage to offer congratulations or criticism. Disappointed, but not
willing to give up, Busch found what seemed to be an ideal opportunity to
corner Ludlam when he saw an advertisement for a comedy awards pre-
sentation called “The Charlie Awards” for which the RTC head had been
ominated. Taking his sister Meg, Busch bravely approached Ludlam and
Quinton’s table and introduced himself, mentioning that he had seen his
comic idol in his audience the week before. Ludlam was warm and sup-
portive, explaining that he was too shy to come backstage and laud Busch
for a performance that he thought “marvelous.”
Inquiring where Busch was to play next, Ludlam invited the young ac-
tor to perform midnight shows at his One Sheridan Square Theatre in the
upcoming months. Thrilled by the opportunity, Busch immediately began
mailing flyers to advertise his upcoming show at this impressive venue. The
week before Busch was scheduled to begin his run of Hollywood Confiden-
tial at the RTC, he approached Ludlam backstage to inquire about schedul-
ing a technical rehearsal. Ludlam, clearly having forgotten his promise to
the young actor, seemed flustered and sent him off to speak to Catherine
Smith, the business manager of the playhouse and company. Smith was
puzzled and annoyed by Busch’s request, explaining that she had no prior
knowledge of the show and thus had not reserved funds to produce it out of
dwindling grant money. Busch pleaded and begged, agreeing to provide a
technical staff on his own, and eventually Smith caved in and agreed to list
his show in the weekly prerecorded telephone advertisement of the RTC.
Busch played every Friday and Saturday midnight for the next two months
at Ludlam’s theater, and though the performances were poorly attended, the
appointment resulted in Busch’s first major reviews in the New York gay
press, including the Village Voice and the Advocate.
With the professional relationship that Busch had always desired with
Ludlam now blooming, another opportunity took place when Ludlam in-
vited him to take the role of Hecate, Goddess of Hell, in the RTC’s pro-
duction of Bluebeard, which had become a signature piece of the troupe
since its premiere in 1970. Busch jumped at the opportunity, offering to
provide his own costume since the clownish garments and makeup that
the previous actor had worn in the role put him off. Piecing together a red
dance skirt, black bustier, platform shoes, and a ratted-out red wig, Busch glamorized the character’s appearance, foreshadowing his signature style of drag that was yet to come. With only fifteen minutes of rehearsal sans Ludlam, Busch prepared to take the stage at the climax of the play when Ludlam as Bluebeard summons Hecate from the bowels of hell. Though Busch received the highest of compliments from several cast members for his uniquely subtle performance, Ludlam was displeased, encouraging Busch to “ham it up more.” Afraid that he would come across as an amateur and convinced that Ludlam was jealous that he had stolen the moment, Busch decided to change very little for the next performance, infuriating Ludlam. Busch recalls Ludlam saying, “Who the fuck do you think you are?” before storming off. On the following night Busch attempted to bend his performance to meet Ludlam’s demands, and Ludlam as Bluebeard reacted by pulling down Busch’s bustier in the midst of the scene. When Busch questioned Ludlam about the incident after the performance, Ludlam responded with a resounding, “I’ll stick my finger up your ass if I feel like it!” and Busch came to the realization that he had no interest in becoming a member of the RTC troupe. Christopher Scott stated, “Charles was quite in control of how he manipulated people. But I don’t think that he was in control of that desperate quality of needing to be at the center of things.” The rift between Ludlam and Busch may have in fact on some level stemmed from the physical differences that molded their different approaches to drag. According to biographer David Kaufman, Ludlam lacked confidence in his thick features, receding hairline, and compact physique, though he fully embraced these physical traits in developing the genderfuck aesthetic that would color his characters such as the hirsute Marguerite Gautier in Camille. Busch, on the other hand, had a slight frame and delicate features and thus could “actually look like a girl.” Thus Busch possessed a physical beauty that Ludlam did not, and Ludlam possessed the public adoration that Busch had yet to achieve.

For the next four years Busch gained continued success with his touring solo performances in San Francisco and Washington, DC, though he struggled to find performance space and a consistent audience in New York. During this period Busch developed a handful of other solo performances, including Vagabond Vignettes (1979), A Theatrical Party (1980), and After You’ve Gone (1982). Busch recollects of this uncertain period that was marked by either performative feast or famine,
The eight years I worked as a solo performer were essential to my development as an actor/writer but filled with loneliness and frustration. It was hard showing up alone in a strange city and forced to rely on the good graces of the mostly impoverished nonprofit theaters that had engaged me. I longed for the sense of camaraderie that can be such a magical part of theater. I also had reached a certain level of professionalism where I received great reviews and could even sell out on a rainy Sunday in Santa Cruz, but just couldn’t earn a living.62

Although the same monetary stresses that plague many young artists made Busch’s vocational choice a challenge, his perseverance and resolve would soon pay off.

East Meets West

In order to support himself while in New York, Busch began working as a temp and moonlighting on summer weekends as a quick-sketch artist at the local Renaissance Fair. It was here that Busch first met Bina Sharif, an eccentric Pakistani performance artist who lived and often performed in the still decrepit East Village. Sharif invited Busch and Elliott (then a struggling theater director and Busch’s roommate) to attend one of her bizarre performances at the storefront gallery / performance space/ bar called the Limbo Lounge on Avenue C in the spring of 1984. The same night that Busch saw Sharif’s performance (which was primarily composed of the dramatic recitation of designer perfume brands) he was intoxicated by the exotic freedom and Weimaresque decadence of the space and audience. He immediately approached the manager of Limbo Lounge, a young punk East Villager going by the moniker Michael Limbo, and inquired about performing in the space. The carefree Limbo immediately scheduled Busch to open three weeks from that night. Busch remembers,

I’d always had these longings for this decadent avant-garde kind of world, to be a part of it, but I never was. I was just enraptured. I was doing my act in non-profit theatres. Even if I was playing in a gay bar, it wasn’t particularly exotic. So I knew that I didn’t want to do my act, I wanted to do something decadent . . . like Lindsay Kemp!63
Kemp became known for his unconventional blend of drag, mime, burlesque, and the intricate and often grotesque Japanese dance form of butoh. After first performing at the Edinburgh festival in 1968, Kemp continued to perform in original works on the stage, film, and television. He collaborated across many art forms and genres with such artists as David Bowie and Derek Jarman. With his self-proclaimed dance troupe, Kemp created graphic productions drawn from any number of sources, featuring himself as a perverse clown playing roles as diverse as Wilde's Salomé to a nineteenth-century Bavarian Cinderella. Senelick suggests that “through Kemp’s mixture of high camp and martyrology British art of the 1960s became imbued with overt images of homosexual taboo.”64 Although Kemp’s aesthetic drew from the crude, often verging on the sensational, the core of his vision is the British equivalent to the radical social changes that spawned the uniquely American Ridiculous theater across the Atlantic. Busch traces one alternative leg of his queer legacy back to Kemp.

Within three weeks Busch had cobbled together a company of actors from friends and acquaintances. Conceptually, Busch formed the troupe around the metatheatrical Pirandellian theme of contemporary actors as a nineteenth-century touring company, composed of stock characters, who in turn played various roles. Busch figureheaded this effort as the aging starlet who plays the lead regardless of her age, in the footsteps of Sarah Bernhardt, who had stubbornly played the role of the teenaged Joan of Arc at fifty-four. The stock company consisted of Arnie Kolodner, the leading man, Kenneth Elliott, the villain, Theresa Marlowe, the ingénue, Andy Halliday, the character actor, Julie Halston, the comedienne, Meghan Robinson, the villainess, and Robert (aka Bobby) Carey, the juvenile. Richard Niles theorizes that this approach of tailoring roles produced celebrity acting: “In essence, a double role was being performed. The Limbo actor presented himself first in the role of an actor in the company, then as the character defined by the given circumstances of the play.”65 This sense of layered performance can be traced back to the origins of the Ridiculous when Ronald Tavel explained in a reinterpretation of Brecht’s _verfremdungseffekt_ that the illusion created by the Ridiculous theater “was that we were presenting the real actor, not some character. The true mentality of the actor.”66

Before Halston joined the company former RTC alumna Lola Pashalinski originally performed the role of La Condesa at the premiere the troupe’s first play, _Vampire Lesbians of Sodom_.67 The troupe decided to call
itself Theatre-in-Limbo in honor of the space that would host its premiere and become its first permanent home. Busch selected the outlandish title prior to writing the script because he thought he could “costume ancient Sodom easily with just G-strings, tulle, and netting.” After writing a brief innuendo-ridden scene about a vampire succubus and a virgin sacrifice, Busch decided to compose a second scene that would place the immortal characters as rivals in the future. He chose 1920s Hollywood, because again, it would be simple to costume with “slips and sashes” and make filmic reference to the Hollywood fetishism that was at the core of the early Ridiculous movement and drawn from Busch’s early obsession with the sirens of silent film. Although the script of Vampire Lesbians is frothy when compared to Ludlam’s chefs d’oeuvre or Busch’s later works, it is must be analyzed for its rich pastiche of cinematic references and how they reflect the gay culture of the period. Additional analysis of how his first play helped to shape what would become Busch’s unique reinterpretation of the Ridiculous genre is also revelatory.

Setting Ridiculous plays in exotic settings of the past had been commonplace since at least Jack Smith’s Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis: A Dream Weapon Ritual (1965). Aside from the ease that the setting of ancient Sodom provided for design elements, the reference of the ancient city was also a tongue-in-cheek snub of the right-wing Christian fundamentalist movement that had been likening the ill-fated Old Testament city with the United States and the visibility of gay rights and HIV/AIDS. The comparison of Sodom to cities such as New York and San Francisco became a frequently used metaphor for the conservative campaign against gay rights. Evangelist and television personality Jerry Falwell used AIDS as sign of apocalyptic doom, advancing his earlier argument that homosexuality was a contagious disease. In the mid-1970s David Wilkerson, a Pentecostal reformed gang member referred to Sodom in his book The Vision. His sensationalizing rhetoric states:

The sin of Sodom will again be repeated in our generation. Of all the sins Sodom was guilty of, the most grievous of all were the homosexual attacks by angry Sodomite mobs attempting to molest innocent people. . . . I have seen things in my vision which makes [sic] me fear for the future of our children. I speak of wild, roving mobs of homosexual men publicly assaulting innocent people in parks, on the streets, and in secret places. . . . Believe me when I tell you the time is not far off
that you will pick up your local newspaper and read sordid accounts of children being attacked by wild homosexual mobs.\footnote{The theory behind this alarmist and fear-mongering statement became instant fodder for the Ridiculous tradition filtered through Busch. In the spirit of Ludlam, who built his theater by ridiculing heteronormative conservatism rather than radically protesting against it, Busch takes the vitriolic bigotry of the antigay movement (with Senator Jesse Helms and Anita Bryant as figureheads) and magnifies its absurdity through parody and satire. When read critically in the context of the component culture of the AIDS crisis at its genesis, the vampire may be read as a figure that represents both sexual seduction and death. Marty Fink notes that “since their popularization in the nineteenth century, vampires have evolved as literary signifiers of sexual deviance [and] embodying illnesses.” The allegorical association of the vampire with those suffering from AIDS positions the mythical figure as a sexual predator, whose immortality can only be snuffed through an act of righteous fundamentalism. In this formula the religious Right becomes emblematic of the vampire killer, and this metaphor forms a series of binary oppositions: evil against the righteous, dark against the light, the weak against the strong. In his book \textit{AIDS and American Apocalypticism}, Thomas L. Long notes that Americans have a frequent history of “redefine[ing] our commitments to social actions by declaring metaphorical war,” and in the case of AIDS a moral war with apocalyptic undertones. Long’s suggestion that a revealing fluidity between the past and the present can be made through other narratives of disease, trauma, and scapegoating also inadvertently supports queer legacy-making through a lateral process. Although Busch wasn’t motivated by the political agenda surrounding the vampire figure while writing \textit{VLOS}, the act of deflecting the political through satire inadvertently falls in line with Ludlam’s formula of packaging irreverence in the form of Camp. This approach is queerer still for its ambivalent position, implementing Camp to eschew labels and stigma that comment wryly on the social construct rather than participating in dualistic rhetoric of the (minority vs. the majority) binary. This sort of Camp aesthetic is the very backbone of \textit{VLOS}. The first act is centered on a virgin maiden who is sacrificed to a Lesbian succubus vampire by two muscular, handsome guards in loincloths. This premise playfully draws upon every stereotype presented in the Wilkerson extract. The virgin sac-}
rifice as portrayed by Busch in a long wig, a bit of tulle tied around his narrow waist, and spike heels was intended to suggest a “a stripper performing a burlesque sketch about Vestal virgins.” The scene climaxes as the girl awaits the arrival of the Succubus, and Ali the guard inquires what he can do to calm her:

**ALI:** Is there nothing I can do to ease your pain?  
**GIRL:** Yes, there is something you could do. Break my hymen. Rape me and I’ll no longer be a virgin fit for sacrifice.  
**ALI:** But, I . . .

*The girl rips off Ali’s loincloth and chases him around screaming “break my hymen, break my hymen!” Hujar pushes her to the ground.*

The comic irony of this scene comes in the contradictory promiscuity of the supposedly innocent virgin girl, and then the sight gag as she rips the loincloth from Ali, exposing his nude muscular body. The display of overdeveloped musculature as the ideal gay body type is linked directly to the gym culture of the early 1980s. Replacing the flannel-clad mustachioed clone of the 1970s, the muscular physique became central to gay body culture and the development of the “himbo” aesthetic. When read in context to vampirism, the display of taut male flesh goes beyond constructs of desire to symbolize youth culture as embodied by corporeal perfection. This alternative reading is relevant because it presents the vampire as a figure that eternally preserves the facade of youth and beauty sans the magic waters of conquistadorial fantasy. Taylor’s recent work on queer subcultures that cling to youthful characteristics defines communities of aging queers as “hotbeds of post-adolescen[ce] . . . that exist largely outside of traditional kinship notions” and helps to clarify the vampire as another model of queer legacy and a metaphoric embodiment of eternal youth(fullness). In other words, in a queer construct the consumption of youth, whether in the form of flesh or cultural capital, is key to avoiding the pitfalls of aging. In this vein the vampire may be read as an underground symbol of youth and sexual virility rather than infection and death. Carey, the actor who originated the role of Ali, was known far more for his statuesque physique than his acting talent, and in every show that followed his body would be revealed as a Camp-infused signature of his performance in a carnal display that was highly anticipated by the audience in each Theatre-in-Limbo production.
The muscle culture of the 1980s also grew in part because anabolic steroids became a common prescription for those suffering from AIDS. Incongruously, the muscular body that appeared to be at the apex of physical health was often the infected body, reliant on steroids to treat chronic weight loss and other forms of physical wasting. In fact, Carey would pass away from AIDS-related complications in Los Angeles in 1991. As the muscular physique became an iconic type in gay culture, the Ridiculous theater embraced it as another stock figure in its cast of postmodern American commedia dell’arte characters. After Busch had introduced Carey to the stage the year before, Ludlam recruited the hunky plumber and occasional stripper Philip Campanaro into his company in 1985 to play the loincloth-clad lead Matho in his Salammbo, not to mention the chorus of bodybuilders that were snatched up from various gyms and escort advertisements and hired to play barbarians. Kaufman posits:

Just when the gay world suddenly had compelling reason to become more monogamous or even celibate, Ludlam was going to celebrate the lascivious promiscuity it had reveled in before—primarily by putting a lot of raw muscle onstage.79

More recently, contemporary Ridiculous performer Taylor Mac continued the tradition of the half-nude muscle boy stock character with actor Todd D’Amour as the evangelical weatherman Colin Clement in his production of Red Tide Blooming (2006) at Manhattan’s PS122. Prior to Busch’s introduction of Carey as the first muscle boy in his Ridiculous fold, nudity had been primarily used as an irreverent and comic convention in the genre, thumbing its theatrical nose at the antiporn movement. Ludlam said,

Pornography is the highest development of naturalism. It was the seriousness of pornography that the [RTC] was never into. It is not in depicting the sexual act that one becomes a pornographer; it is in demanding to be taken seriously. Depicting sexual things—nudity and all that—we were taking a satirical view, rather than trying to arouse the audience sexually.80

Ludlam regularly employed nudity and heightened sexual situations in his productions, though most often in the form of the grotesque. The hilarious climax (both figurative and literal) of his infamous production of Bluebeard came in the nude sex scene between Ludlam as the hirsute
Bluebeard and the obese, malapropism-spewing Pashalinski as Miss Cubbidge. Rather than this shocking and provocative approach, Busch was far more interested in exploring the ironies of beauty and glamour. Ludlam’s camp was “motivated by [a] rage” that was spawned by gay oppression, whereas Busch was using his theater as a celebration of life that was often cut short.

Although the gay culture of the 1980s embraced and then exploded the culture of superfluous muscle, Busch had created Carey’s stock image as a hyperbolized type, not something to emulate in the performance of daily life. This late twentieth-century reincarnation of the cult of the body developed because American popular culture was overrun with images of the nude body. This overt use of nudity became a soft-core pornographic exhibitionism rather than the thinly veiled declaration of freedom developed by the flower children two decades before. In his article “The World Made Flesh: Staging Pornography in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” Senelick states that pornography is “meant to arouse a sexual response” and “is expected to culminate in orgasm,” before concluding that the public consumption of such material makes the desired orgasm impossible. Although Busch delightedly takes full advantage of exposing the male body beautiful, he consistently juxtaposes the moment of revealing with a sharp anachronistic irony that dissolves the physical fantasy. As Ali and Hujar appear onstage in all of their masculine glory, they exchange the following dialogue:

**Hujar:** So what brings you to Sodom?
**Ali:** Don’t scoff but I’ve come to seek my fortune.
**Hujar:** My friend, you’ve made a wise move. This city has everything. Have you been to the bars?
**Ali:** Last night I was taken to a place called “The Galley Slave.” The whole place was supposed to look like a slave ship. There was this fellow who they tied up in a sling and . . . and . . . and they shoved a golden pestle up his you know what.
**Hujar:** (lewdly) You don’t say. Last night my lover and I went to the baths in Gomorrah. Talk about trolls. It was like open house at a leper colony.
**Ali:** I don’t want to offend you but I’m really not into bars and baths. I’m looking for a relationship.

Herein the ancient guards become typical Manhattan gay twenty-something’s, with Ali “seeking his fortune” in the materialistic New York
of Reaganomics. The “Galley Slave” could easily be any of the backrooms in hardcore gay bars that grew out of the sexually free atmosphere in the late 1970s and dotted lower Manhattan. In Busch’s fictionalized account of his East Village beginnings, the novel Whore of Lost Atlantis, he even renames the Limbo Lounge “Gomorrah.” It can be argued that “leprosy” may be read as a metaphor for AIDS, as Ludlam would also use leprosy in the same context in his aforementioned AIDS play Salammbo. Additionally, Ali’s search for a relationship supports the desire for commitment and companionship that grew in part out of the AIDS crisis, as well as smashing the stereotype or fantasy that the beautiful Sodomite guard would be sexually promiscuous and accessible.

After the virgin succumbs to advances of the vampire Succubus in the first scene, the second opens with the Succubus reincarnated as La Condesa, a silent screen vamp and the virgin as Madeleiné Astarté, a stage actress. The women, both immortal vampires, have been passing through the centuries as rivals and enemies. The old-Hollywood location of the second scene refers to the eccentric and flamboyant silent film star Alla Nazimova, whose hotel complex “The Garden of Allah” on Sunset Boulevard in the early 1920s was often the location of exclusive lesbian parties. Replendent with lush foliage, a Black Sea-shaped swimming pool, and twenty-five bungalows, the Garden of Allah became the hot spot for Hollywood’s elite to live and play with carnal abandon. Nazimova’s role as a gay cult figure had been solidified after her eccentric version of Wilde’s Salomé was released in 1923. Purported to have an all-gay cast in homage to Wilde (though this has been proven to be myth), Nazimova’s film was excessively rich in Camp aesthetics and theatrics, assuring it a place in the repository of the Ridiculous impulse and conscience.

La Condesa and Astarté are pursued by the vampire hunter Gregory Salazar (an homage to Stoker’s Van Helsing), who is disguised in drag as the gossip columnist Oatsie Carewe before the second scene blends into the final installment, which takes place in contemporary Las Vegas. When Vampire Lesbians first premiered at the Limbo Lounge in 1984, only the first two scenes were presented; the play then concluded with the suspenseful question “Will they escape, or will they perish?” before the melodramatic tag of “to be continued . . .” The third and final Las Vegas scene was not added until Vampire Lesbians moved from the Limbo Lounge to its second home, another East Village club called 8 BC, before going back to a new and larger Limbo Lounge and finally settling at the historic Off-Broadway Provincetown Playhouse.
The Las Vegas scene opens with three chorus boys exchanging a flamboyant patois that re-creates the affected dialect that arose in the gay ghettos of New York and San Francisco. Madeleiné is now Madeleine Andrews, a middle-aged Vegas headliner. The characters are introduced by the following exchange:

**Zack:** . . . Take this tip, buddy, stay away from the queens in this company.

**Danny:** I heard that, Miss Zack. Stay away from the queens, indeed. Sweetie, has Miss Thing invited you to her dungeon room? Or did I arrive too soon?

**PJ:** Hey guys, come on. Miss Andrews will be here any minute.

**Danny:** I hope she is. It’s about time she discovered this one’s true colors.

**Zack:** Jealousy, jealousy, jealousy.

**Danny:** If you’re referring to the one night we slept together. I’d talk about your cock but I’ve got respect for the dead.

**Zack:** You goddamm . . .

*Zack tries to attack Danny but PJ stops them.*

**PJ:** Hey guys, come on, can’t you discuss this calmly?

**Danny:** I’ll tell you what’s going on. I’ve been dancing in Madeleine Andrew’s Vegas act for five years. Before that I was a dancer on her TV Variety Show. I’ve paid my dues with that broad. My lover David has been with her just as long. Then Mata Hari here joins the company and tries to turn her against us.

**Zack:** First we have vampires on the strip, now I’ve got an hysterical faggot to deal with.

**Danny:** I wouldn’t be worried about vampires, Whorina. Your ass is hardly virgin territory.

This conversation operates on a variety of levels. The hyperbolized masculinity of the muscled actors is humorously inflated when they open their mouths and a slew of purses torrentially fall out. This contradictory effeminacy works to deconstruct the erotic desirability of the actors on the stage, separating the pornographic myth from reality. Performed before an audience that was primarily composed of gay men and their supporters, the language that might otherwise be considered as irresponsible,
offensive, or blatantly homophobic is reclaimed and celebrated. Elliott points out that this can be linked to Muñoz’s theory of “disidentification” wherein “damaged stereotypes” are recycled “as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation.” This is reminiscent of Ludlam’s reliance on the encoded inferences or passwords that litter his own work, and which he broadly defined as Camp. For Busch, the Campy use of the patois, paired with gay-specific references, becomes a common ground, which becomes the catalyst for conversation and cathartic bonding in the midst of crisis. Moreover, the inclusion of encoded language heightened a feeling of belonging in the ephemeral escapist world that only existed as the show was performed. Cleto traces the development of gay “argot” from Harold Beaver’s groundbreaking 1981 essay “Homosexual Signs,” built upon the Barthesian principle of “persona” to frame Camp as a homosexual language, to Phillip Core, who expanded this idea to define Camp as a “[gay] Masonic gesture” that utilized secret signs to share occultic and “secret knowledge.” Linguist William Leap surmised that gay slang, which he terms the “lavender lexicon,” developed through the modern era as a sort of protective armor in an otherwise hostile world where homosexuality was directly associated with deviance and perversion. Don Kulick extends Leap’s notion by making reference to D. Sonenschein’s Stonewall-era theory that gay slang was not merely isolationist, but also served to “reflect common interests, problems, and needs of the population.” Although the nightclub scene is satirical bordering on absurd, it does provide a reflection of gay culture that speaks beyond the specificity of the period when it was written.

Carey and Kolodner, the same actors who portrayed the guards of ancient Sodom in scene 1, also play the roles of the gay dancers. This conscious doubling implies that just as fictional vampires have existed since ancient times, so have gay men been a vital part of culture and society. This is a reaction to Falwell’s and Bryant’s accusation of gay recruitment, the latter’s explanation of a seemingly instant gay visibility that had previously been hidden in the dangerous climate of the pre-civil rights era. Busch bookends the play with another snub of the religious Right when the character of Tracy (played by Marlowe), who has “been on tour with the Young Republican First College Christian Review,” pulls a Sally Bowles, abandoning her morals to become Madeleine’s “latest protégée.”

It was also during the initial run of Vampire Lesbians that Busch developed his signature curtain speech at the end of every performance. Always opening with the statement “Bless you, darlings,” Busch channeled a
nineteenth-century diva exhausted from her hour sacrificed on the stage and lending a Camp-infused authenticity to the shtick of a touring stock company. Company designer Brian Whitehall added to this illusion with a series of interchangeable painted drops and by adding footlights to the edge of the stage.

The longevity of Vampire Lesbians Off-Broadway arose from a combination of cult status (some evenings audience members would recite dialogue à la The Rocky Horror Picture Show) and a glowing review by D. J. R. Bruckner in the New York Times. He wrote of the production,

> One can imagine a cult forming. Costumes flashier than pinball machines, outrageous lines, awful puns, sinister innocence, harmless depravity—it's all here. And it's contagious; this kind of campy show that transforms everything it touches attracts audiences that could take over and finish the performance if the cast walked out in the middle.91

The reference to the potential for the cast to walk out hearkens back to the early days of Ludlam’s company when in the epic productions of Big Hotel and Turds from Hell the cast followed a revolving door policy and changed like the wind on any given night. Busch’s rapid rise to success using the Ridiculous genre did not sit well with his old mentor. In the midst of the Vampire Lesbians fad, Ludlam and Quinton went to see the production unbeknownst to Busch and the company. Kaufman suggests that “Ludlam returned from the performance enraged, griping that superficial elements of his work had indeed been stolen, but without any of their substance.”92 Busch relates that he had no knowledge of this and only learned of Ludlam’s anger and disappointment upon reading Kaufman’s account long after Ludlam’s death. As reported by several original RTC members, Ludlam’s jealousy was a vice that often plagued him, stewed up from a combination of self-doubt and the need to be in control. If Ludlam was indeed angry with Busch, his disappointment was contradictory since all of his work had also been influenced and collaged from preexisting genres and works. Because Ludlam’s life was cut prematurely short in the midst of a prolific and expanding career, perhaps he was not yet prepared to pass off the Ridiculous torch to his heirs, and particularly not to those outside the grasp of his controlling fist and the RTC. While Ludlam saw himself and his work in the present, the next generation was already looking to his work as a theater that represented a watershed moment in the recent gay past.

As Busch’s company gained critical respect and popular success, major changes occurred regarding the treatment of and public visibility of AIDS. The gay and theater communities responded immediately to the epidemic in the form of vigils, fund-raisers, and new plays that tackled the still disconcertingly difficult theme of the disease. While Busch was still in the early phase of Theatre-in-Limbo, ACT UP founder Larry Kramer’s AIDS play *The Normal Heart* (1985) was produced to critical acclaim at Manhattan’s Joseph Papp Public Theater and Robert Chesley’s *Night Sweat* was featured at San Francisco’s Theatre Rhinoceros the same year. As the 1980s bled into the following decade, the identity of AIDS shifted as the disease moved beyond the stigma of only a gay epidemic. With the death of blood-transfusion victim Ryan White in 1990 and heterosexual basketball superstar Magic Johnson’s public admission to suffering from the disease in 1991, the face of HIV/AIDS drastically changed. Additionally, advancement in medicines such as antiviral and protease-inhibiting “cocktail” therapy helped AIDS to become a chronic disease rather than an immediate death sentence.

This cultural shift allowed for a return to normality within the gay community, and as safe-sex campaigns became a sign of the times, the fear that hovered over New York in the early days of the AIDS epidemic lessened. Busch’s Ridiculous plays became assimilated into popular theater culture in the 1980s. Though his theater continued to attract a gay
audience with its use of Camp and innuendo, its role as an escapist commune was no longer as relevant or appropriate. *VLOS* became a staple of the New York theater tourist trade (Busch and the company were even featured in the widely read tabloid magazine *People*, on August 20, 1984), making it one of the longest-running Off-Broadway shows in New York’s history. Busch’s drag was no longer a decadent and eccentric manifestation of the East Village avant-garde, but rather something wild to bring Mom and Dad to when they were seeking urban adventure while visiting from small-town America.

La Grande Dame

When asked what he considered to be the seminal works of his career, Busch responded with the predictable *Vampire Lesbians*, but also with two works from the post-Limbo period: the Tony-nominated *Tale of the Allergist’s Wife*, for which Busch stepped away from the makeup table and served as playwright, and the stage production and major motion picture *Die Mommie, Die!*

After the members of Theatre-in-Limbo had gone their separate ways, Busch penned his first play in which he would forgo drag to play a gay man. He had always been impressed by the fact that Ludlam dynamically played all of his characters with equal charisma and power regardless of gender. In fact, Ludlam’s male roles were more than triple the number of his dragged-up leading ladies. In the play *You Should Be So Lucky*, Busch portrayed Christopher, a young New York electrologist who is swept up into a Cinderella tale of an enchanted ball and a wealthy benefactor in the midst of pop-cultural references that run the gamut from old Hollywood films to contemporary New York. In his first major post-Limbo project, Busch brought along troupe members Elliott to direct and Halston to play the role of Lenore, the brassy Jewish daughter of Christopher’s benefactor, Mr. Rosenberg. After an initial reading at the Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor, the production played for a limited run at Primary Stages beginning in November 1994, and received affectionate reviews (“a hymn to the sanctuary of escapism”) from critics who were already supporters of Busch’s work. It was Halston, however, who received the major acclaim for a vivid characterization that far outshone Busch’s “suppressed flamboyance” and “shrinking-violet persona.” Furthermore Busch recollects,
At best I was this very withdrawn and shy kind of person who blossoms, and it wasn’t much of a fun part to do. I’m so female-centric in my writing that it turned out that women’s roles were the best ones. I just didn’t like playing that nerdy kind of guy. I liked playing the glamorous lady who’s desired—and everybody wants to make love to her! I also resented when in reviews people said that this was me playing myself. . . . Honey, I am much more like Irish O’Flannagan [from *Times Square Angel*], and Gertrude Garnet [from *The Lady in Question*] than I am that boy.95

This experience confirmed to Busch that he was best suited for drag, and Halston’s rave reviews resulted in a bitter feud that ended their friendship until it was reinstated several years later. During this period Busch also wrote his novel *Whores of Lost Atlantis* (1996) and continued to develop several new productions, including a World War II USO show satire called *Swingtime Canteen* (1995); a new musical, *The Green Heart* (1997), based on Jack Ritchie’s short story of the same name; *Queen Amarantha* (1997), an homage to a nineteenth-century historical melodrama; and *Shanghai Moon* (1999), a Theatre-in-Limbo-style production set in exotic 1930s China.

Working off the popularity of Halston’s character type in *You Should Be So Lucky*, Busch developed an extended monologue as a “raging Jewish lady” named Miriam Passman for his new solo cabaret act *Flipping My Wig*.96 In addition to the Passman role Busch created a range of other characters in the performance, including a Prohibition Era tough-as-nails nightclub chanteuse and a suburban housewife who lives her fantasy of transforming into Edith Piaf for one night. The show was originally performed in Philadelphia and directed by Elliott before transferring to the Manhattan Theatre Club. It was through exploring this Upper West Side, pseudointelligentsia, Jewish character initially in *You Should Be So Lucky* and then in *Flipping My Wig* that Busch came to create what he considers to be one of his most important works, *Tale of the Allergist’s Wife*, which opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club in November 2000. The production was directed by Lynne Meadow and was nominated for a Tony Award for best play the following spring along with Busch for best playwright. Busch was not featured in this production, but instead gave over the leading lady reins to Linda Lavin as the neurotic Marjorie. Drawing upon his own experience growing up culturally Jewish in New York along with verbatim fragments of borrowed conversations between his aunt and sis-
ter, Busch composed a succinct and uproarious boulevard comedy that had the Broadway community suddenly proclaiming him “the next Neil Simon.”97 Just as Ludlam’s Catholic upbringing played heavily into the themes of his plays, this was an opportunity for Busch to express a satire of his own urban Jewish-American experience. In order for the work to reach its full potential, he knew that he had to find the perfect lead to carry off the challenging but familiar role of Marjorie. Busch professes to have convinced Lavin to take a role in the production by “pursuing her like I had Ludlam . . . [and] writing her an outrageous letter comparing her to Bernhardt and Duse.”98

The intersection of urban Jewish and gay identities that plays heavily into Busch’s work had been a traceable part of New York City’s culture since the early days of the gay liberation movement. Scholars including Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and Jay Geller have laid solid groundwork on the relationship between gayness and Jewishness.99 Although Jews have been strong supporters and producers of the New York theater scene since the origins of Broadway, it was not until the early 1980s that playwrights who were Jewish, gay, and dedicated to writing about gay/Jewish themes (such as Harvey Fierstein, Tony Kushner, and Martin Sherman) began to have a regular presence. The conflation of Jewish and gay ideologies is successful because themes of Jewish identity in such dramas echo those found in gay-themed works. For example, questions may address assimilation (whether cultural or religious), alienation and persecution (paralleling anti-Semitism with homophobia), or the source of social definition (cultural or individual). Furthermore, Reform and Reconstructionist movements as well as secular cultural approaches to Judaism have been largely accepting of homosexuality throughout the twentieth century (which is not to ignore the rampant homophobia that has been reported in some Orthodox communities).

A 2007 Washington Post article entitled “Gay Jews Connect Their Experience to Story of Purim” goes as far as declaring the holiday as a “National Jewish Coming-Out Day.”100 Purim celebrates the ancient triumph of the Jews over Haman (an evil royal vizier who ordered the Jews exterminated) with Esther’s revelation (or “coming out”) to the love-struck Persian king Ahasuerus that she was indeed Jewish. Sometimes called the “Jewish Halloween,” Purim celebrations “embrace cross-dressing and debauchery, [and] serve as unofficial gay pride events.”101 The carnival atmosphere, subversive gender practices, and allegorical implications of these celebrations provide a safe and comfortable environment for experimen-
tation and have in turn been appropriated by the gay Jewish community. Abe Rybeck, artistic director of Boston’s resident queer company The Theatre Offensive, drew upon this phenomenon in his Purim-themed drag musical *Pure PolyEsther* (2007). Rybeck connects his own life experience back to the story, relating, “Me coming out as queer, as gay, as part of the power of being able to do that comes from the book of Esther. It really helps people to understand oppression and what it looks like to fight for liberation . . . from the threat of death or slavery or the closet.” 102 Busch’s drag practices and performances are propelled by this amalgam of gay and Jewish identities, as is their reception by an audience fluent in the cultural symbols and innuendos. The mainstreaming of these characters was partially due to convenient timing.

The popular inclusive reception of Busch’s Jewish matron was partially set in motion by the widespread cultural exposure of comedian Mike Myers’s drag character of Linda Richman on the weekly sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* from 1991 to 1994. Based in part on his mother-in-law, Myers-as-Richman hosted a fictional local cable talk show entitled *Coffee Talk*. Myers hyperbolized and conflated Jewish stereotypes including a heavy New York accent, a sprinkling of Yiddish idioms (with the trademark catchphrases “It’s like buttah,” and “I’m a little verklempt”), and veneration for Barbra Streisand. 103 Myers-as-Richman furthered the Jewish stereotype by wearing tacky sweaters, huge glasses, and garishly painted acrylic fingernails with which she constantly adjusted her bouffant hair. Because Myers’s image as a comedian on *Saturday Night Live* was initially based on his reputation as a hockey-loving Canadian “guy’s guy” (cemented by his other characters like “Wayne” from the “Wayne’s World” sketch), his performance in drag helped to shift the perception of drag solely from a gay bar pastime to a (still) viable comic convention. Furthermore, the presentation of urban “Jewishness” exposed a cultural stock-character (already recognizable in the city) to a suburban or even rural audience distanced from the cultural practices that were being magnified. Thus, an audience was already prepared to accommodate the spirited fun of the *Allergist’s Wife*, which tells the story of Marjorie, a depressed and wealthy Jewish wife of a retired allergist, Ira, living a comfortable life taking care of her aging, vulgar mother in the social bastion of the Upper West Side. Though Myers’s widely received television performances are not part of Busch’s direct queer legacy, I argue that his presence does help to better clarify the cultural relevance of *Allergist’s Wife* and the accessibility of the legacy I have traced herein.
When Marjorie’s adventurous childhood friend Lee suddenly reappears, all of the characters are hilariously left questioning their sanity. In his New York Times review, critic Ben Brantley declared that with Allergist’s Wife Busch had “swum into the mainstream.” Although he was thrilled by the critical acclaim that the play received, Busch was resentful of this limiting statement. He responds,

I guess that I didn’t realize that I was so out of the loop, which I guess was because in my way of thinking each of the plays that we had done post-Limbo Lounge had been at reputable nonprofit theatres and had transferred commercially. I guess if you’re in drag and your work is mostly movie pastiche, then you’re not in the mainstream.

Busch’s sentiment reflects the precarious situation that he found himself in the New York theater scene: ambivalently hovering between the disenfranchised avant-garde and the commercial popular stage, but belonging to neither. Allergist’s Wife pinpoints Busch’s desire to be taken seriously as part of the uptown theater community, though it has also disenchanted many of the lower Manhattan performers, like Kelly, whom he originally struggled alongside.

In creating Allergist’s Wife Busch turned to Ludlam’s recipe of mixing literary and academic references with vulgar humor and pop-cultural inferences. Scene 1 opens with the following exchange as Mohammed the doorman struggles to assist Marjorie in installing a new light fixture:

MOHAMMED: Mrs. Taub, describe to me your vision once more.
MARJORIE: It should be a feverish dream out of Baudelaire. Exotic, mesmerizing. This doesn’t say “Extravagant decadence.” This says “Lighting fixture.”
MOHAMMED: No, it says “Romantic opulence.”
MARJORIE: (Losing her patience) It says, “Repro bought at cost.”

This dialogue exemplifies the Ludlamesque formula of pairing the intellectually elite, “Baudelaire,” with the crass juxtaposition of daily life. The metaphor of a counterfeit antique bought at a discount works particularly well as analogous to Busch’s style of work: it relishes the paradox of a cheap foundation masquerading with an obviously fake but still luxurious facade (while also providing a wry to connection to Sontag’s connection of Tiffany lamps to the Camp aesthetic). This is particularly reminiscent of Lud-
lam’s later plays such as *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde* (1983) and *The Artificial Jungle* (1986), which explored the contradictory schisms of the American Dream versus the realities of a contemporary American existence.

The references in *Allergist’s Wife* are diverse and complex, including Kafka, Rimbaud, Beauvoir, Hesse, Helen Keller, Plato, Böll, Grass, Mann, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Flaubert, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Spinoza, *Dracula*, Goethe, *The Vagina Monologues*, Blanche DuBois, *Waiting for Godot*, Weimar Berlin, Judaic ritual, *Siddhartha*, Cocteau, *La Bohème*, and Shakespeare. Typically, Marjorie makes these references with the intention of pretentious name-dropping (another stereotype of New York City’s Jewish upper class). This connects back to the Myers-as-Richman character that encouraged viewers to talk about esoteric and ridiculous topics such as “The Romanesque Church design was based on the Roman Basilica, discuss,” or “The Thighmaster is neither a thigh nor a master, discuss,” as she collected herself from her *verklempt* state (usually brought on by a reference to Streisand).107 The success of *Allergist’s Wife* on Broadway confirmed Busch’s reputation as a theatrical force to be reckoned with, though his downtown fans had known this for years.

While *Allergist’s Wife* was still in final rewrites and rehearsals, Busch had migrated to the West Coast, where he starred in a new play, *Die Mommie, Die!* (1999). Again directed by Elliott, the play evoked a Grand Guignol film of the 1950s while also drawing upon the ancient Greek (and Ridiculous favorite) Electra myth to convey the dramatic downfall of a family smothered in the kitsch of late-1960s Hollywood. The basic plot is as follows:

Angela Arden, an aging pop star, has a torrid affair with a young, macho, out-of-work actor and tennis pro named Tony Parker to escape from her unhappy marriage to Sol Sussman, a film producer. Angela retaliates against her husband’s emotional abuse and viciously murders him with a poisoned suppository. Angela’s bitter daughter Edith (in the Electra role) convinces her gay, black-sheep brother Lance that they must get to the bottom of the suspicious situation and avenge their father’s death. In the meantime, Parker, who is really a secret agent, seduces everyone in the house. Finally, by slipping LSD into their mother’s coffee, the children take Angela on a wild acid trip in which she reveals that she is actually their Aunt Barbara, having killed her sister and stolen her identity years before. The play satirically critiques the notion of celebrity in America, highlighting first the ecstatic rise and then the bitterness that follows as a product of the fleeting nature of fame. Additionally, the play sends up the potentially dire fate of
actresses in a culture obsessed with youth and beauty. The erratic aging starlet has been a common movie trope since at least Gloria Swanson's dynamic portrayal of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and continued to be represented throughout the 1960s in films such as * Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964) and *Berserk* (1967). While Busch is unabashedly satirizing these films with neo-Ridiculous aplomb, his portrayal of Angela also embodies a kind of empathy for his predecessors, with Busch years older than when he convincingly portrayed pretty, youthful ingenues at the Limbo Lounge.

The structure of *Die Mommie, Die!* is reminiscent of Ludlam's “well-made play” period (1973–80), in which he created scripts based around the format codified by Eugène Scribe and Victorien Sardou and the farces of Georges Feydeau. Arguably Busch's most sophisticated script to date, *Die Mommie, Die!* achieves success because Busch retained his trademark glamorous aesthetic while also embracing the multiple plots and complex literary references that made Ludlam famous in his own work. Busch's maturation as a playwright is a product of both experience and experimentation. For example, the notorious suppository murder scene at the end of act 1 plays as follows:

*(SOL takes the huge wrapped suppository out of his robe.)*

**SOL:** How are you supposed to open this damn thing?  
**ANGELA:** Let me do it.

*(She takes the suppository from him and begins taking the wrapper off. SOL walks away from her.)*

**SOL:** Angela, Angela, what time has wrought. I remember when I first laid eyes on you. You were in a sound booth in that forcockta recording studio on Fiftieth and Third Street. So lovely and fresh. I said to myself “Someday that delicate songbird's gonna be mine and I'm gonna boff her brains out.”

*(While he's talking and not looking, she dips the suppository into her quite lethal glass of warm milk. She hands him the suppository.)*

In this scene Busch as Angela plays out to the audience members, letting them in on her sly secret unbeknownst to her ill-fated husband. As she dips the suppository into the poisoned milk, Busch as Angela stares
ominously at the audience with a suggestive wink. Sol’s chauvinistic demeanor blatantly convinces the audience to take the seemingly victimized Angela’s side (who is already the center of attention—Busch in a signature role). The self-conscious acting style employed by Busch obliterates the fourth wall and was the essence that made Ludlam’s early Ridiculous plays feel more like parties than traditional theatrical performances. Ludlam and Busch invite the audience to partake in the intrigue of the plays. The scene continues in a carnal ballet that could have been extracted from one of Ludlam’s plays: the aforementioned raucous sex scene in *Bluebeard*, the climaxing Empress dildo scene in *Eunuchs of the Forbidden City*, or the consumptive blow job that concludes *Camille*. Busch takes on the insertion of Sol’s suppository for the theme of his own clownishly macabre pas de deux.

**ANGELA:** Here you go. Ready for insertion . . .
**SOL:** It’s the size of a Nathan’s hotdog, I can’t do this.

((She takes it from him))

**ANGELA:** Here. I’ll help you.
**SOL:** Are you kidding?
**ANGELA:** I’m tired of hearing you complain about the bloat. Bend over. Come on, Sol, bend over.
**SOL:** What the hell? Just be careful. I can’t believe this.

((She lifts up his robe. Away from the audience’s view, she pulls down his underpants. She looks around for a brief moment wondering where she can find a lubricant. Giving up, she tries to insert the suppository.))

**SOL:** Be careful. I’ve got a hemorrhoid! Ow!! You’re killing me.
**ANGELA:** Now you know how I felt every night you forced yourself on me.
**SOL:** ((She sticks it in him once more.) Ow! Motherfucker!
**ANGELA:** Darling, just trying to get the whole thing in. You’re very tight. You must do your utmost to relax.

((With a violent shove, she pushes the suppository into him. SOL cries out in agony.))
sol: Oy!!!
angela: All done. Operation complete.

(Sol sits down on the sofa.)

sol: I wonder how long it takes before I feel anything.
angela: Almost immediately from what I understand.
sol: You’ve got a queer expression on your face. What are you thinking about?
angela: Perhaps how nothing turns out exactly as one plans.109

The scene concludes with Sol’s violent death from the poisoned suppository. Busch owns the scene by mugging for the audience with both pleasure and disgust as he inserts the suppository onstage, blocked by a large sofa. The grotesque situation mixed with gay innuendo is pure Ludlamesque ridicule with a clear influence from the farce of Molière. As Angela inserts the suppository into Sol’s anus, both dialogue and actions suggest a gay first-time sexual encounter, as Angela in the guise of the “dominant” eases Sol, the hesitant “submissive,” to relax. This double entendre is heightened by the fact that Busch is a man in drag, in much the same way that Ludlam used drag in *Camille* to showcase a gay kiss with Bill Vehr as Armand. The joke climaxes when after Angela completes her dirty task Sol inquires about the “queer expression” on her face. Though the innuendo is obvious in its delivery, it uses an exaggerated version of a straight perspective that is then filtered through Camp to speak uniquely to the contagion of the gay audience that potentially finds humor in similar life experiences.

Another scene of note is when Angela is drugged by Edith and Lance to force a confession. Relying on manic gestures, sporadic sound cues, and bizarre lighting, the scene is transformed into a hazy manifestation straight out of 1960s drug culture. This acts as another unintentional homage to the early Ridiculous theater that was more often than not watched through a drug haze by its audience, as were the early days of the East Village renaissance.

While Busch was in Hollywood performing in *Die Mommie, Die!* he received a telephone call from a young up-and-coming director named Robert Lee King, who was interested in turning *Psycho Beach Party* into a major motion picture through the gay-owned production company Strand. Busch jumped at the chance of reformatting the short play into a longer screenplay. Rather than play the revised Gidget-like character of Chicklet (as he origi-
nally had at Theatre-in-Limbo), Busch created the role of a no-nonsense police investigator, Monica Stark, for himself. King ambitiously shot the film in only twenty-one days. Although Busch expresses disappointment in the casting of “model types” rather than actors and the lack of transitional shots in the film, he was pleased in the way that he was presented. The task of presenting himself as the iconic “leading lady” Charles Busch was a challenge since he was no longer appropriate to play the role of sixteen-year-old Chicklet. In the original Theatre-in-Limbo production the Ridiculous sensibility was pushed to its limit when Busch as Chicklet removed his bikini top and exposed his thin male torso and remarked, “I’m hopeless. I’m built just like a boy. I wonder if I’ll ever fill out.” This clever sight gag defines the Ridiculous device to reach beyond the stage and invite the audience to be part of the theatrical clique that is an active player in the game. In the film, Busch’s shining moment comes in a car sex scene with Gibson as surf king Kanaka. The scene showcases Busch and Gibson kissing passionately in close-up before pulling away to a wide shot revealing the side view of a female body double’s naked breast. Working on the same principle as the original gag, this sequence serves to remind the audience of the ludicrous fakery that the characters are completely oblivious to.

The release of the film *Psycho Beach Party* in 2000 coincided with Busch’s annus mirabilis. The year was hallmarked by the opening and eager reception of *Allergist’s Wife* that November. In 2001, after feeling out of sorts, Busch was rushed to Manhattan’s Presbyterian Hospital, where he underwent open heart surgery for a genetic defect that had ripped his aorta. Busch’s mother had suddenly passed away from heart failure when he was a young boy, and he unknowingly suffered from the same condition. Busch recovered fully from the operation and says that the experience “gave [him] clarification that [he] doesn’t want to spend time working on projects that make [him] miserable.” Several television production companies had pursued Busch to take a position as a writer, but he abandoned this unsatisfactory work and returned to his childhood obsession—the movies.

In 2003 Busch was approached to make *Die Mommie, Die!* into a motion picture by producers Dante De Loreto and Anthony Edwards. Dissatisfied with the final editing of *Psycho Beach Party*, Busch was excited by the opportunity to take part in a film that better showcased his personal aesthetic and approach to the Ridiculous. In adapting the screenplay, Busch closely followed the theatrical plot, creating a tight production that was marked with a filmic theatricality. With an all-star cast including 1990s television heartthrob Jason Priestley in the role of Tony, and
directed by Mark Rucker, the film caused a minor sensation, with Busch winning a Special Jury Prize for outstanding performance at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival. Busch fondly recollects:

We shot the movie in nineteen days and shot more footage than was planned. There were scenes that were designed to be shot in just one master shot, and we did it early and got close-ups, so it was just a dream! Maybe the most exciting nineteen days of my life. I mean most of the time in our lives we aren’t aware that something great is going on until after the fact, but I was aware of every moment. I thought, “I can’t believe this is happening to me.”

Following the success of the film, Busch revived the theatrical production of Die Mommie, Die! Off-Broadway in November 2007. Consistently developing new projects that retain his unique revision of the Ridiculous aesthetic, Busch occasionally presents summer productions in Sag Harbor, Long Island.

As epidemiological advances have been made in the fight against HIV/AIDS since the 1990s Busch has shifted his authorial perspective, producing new works that maintain his original Camp sensibility but that are intended to speak to a larger and more mainstream audience, such as his Tony Award–nominated Tale of the Allergist’s Wife (2000). Vampire Lesbians of Sodom continues to be produced throughout amateur and regional theater across the globe. Though contemporary performances of Vampire Lesbians may no longer resonate with the play’s original impact as a site of respite from the threat of HIV/AIDS, such productions maintain a seminal importance as a preservative of a specific time and place in LGBTQ history. This step toward the formulation of a queer narrative is achieved through the collective reading of performance and oral history as an alternative archive, revealing an intersection between dramaturgy, performance ethnography, and social history.

Epilogue

Charles Busch has continued to work consistently both as a playwright and as a drag performer. Since 2007 Busch has primarily moved back and forth between sentimental Jewish plays that draw from his youth and Hol-
lywood homage plays that continue the silver screen diva-worship initiated by the original Ridiculous.

For his play *Our Leading Lady* (2007), Busch returned to his Ridiculous roots, where he had envisioned himself as an ingénue in a nineteenth-century touring theater company. From this he drew the inspiration to write the story of Laura Keene, the actress who was performing at Ford’s Theatre the night of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination. The play was produced by the Manhattan Theatre Club, directed by Lynne Meadow, and starred noted television actress Kate Mulgrew (now famous for her role of Red in the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*) in the title role. Don Shewey noted the connection between Busch and Ludlam, writing, “Just as Ludlam’s *The Mystery of Irma Vep* continues to be a regional theater staple, I can imagine *Our Leading Lady* being snapped up by every rep company in the country.” Shewey also used this forum to ponder, “What kind of work would Ludlam doing if he hadn’t died of AIDS?”

While romancing the “what if” of any situation is certainly fun after-dinner conversation, in the case of a queer legacy like this, it seems to negate Busch’s distinct contribution by comparing him to a mentor who he has become distanced from both temporally and culturally. As evidenced, Ludlam’s Ridiculous inspired Busch, but Busch’s neo-Ridiculous is not Ludlam’s.

After the success of *Our Leading Lady* Busch was driven to return to the stage, first in his self-penned send-up of vintage Hollywood in *The Third Story* (2008) at the Lucille Lortel Theatre in 2009 and the following year in *The Divine Sister*, first at Theatre for a New City before moving to the Soho Playhouse. Busch continued a tradition of Camping-up Catholic rituals that had been a staple of his Ridiculous forebears by writing a pastiche of classic films that featured stories about nuns, including *The Song of Bernadette*, *The Bells of Saint Mary’s*, *The Singing Nun*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Agnes of God*. Starring as the Mother Superior, Busch also invited early Theatre-in-Limbo actress Julie Halston to play one of the convent sisters.

In 2011 Busch was awarded the title of “Off-Broadway Legend” by the Off-Broadway Alliance, and his play *Olive and the Bitter Herbs*, essentially a seder gone awry, premiered at Manhattan’s Primary Stages, setting up a sort of formula where he continues to write while acting in only every other play. A successful production of *Judith of Bethulia* premiered at Theater for a New City in 2012, a Ridiculous pastiche of D. W. Griffith’s 1914 silent film of the same name, with other biblical epics including *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949). This marked the
first time in the history of Theater for a New City that a show was completely sold out for its entire run before its opening performance. Busch portrayed the title character as an aesthetic homage to his own theatrical heroine, Sarah Bernhardt, by wearing a headdress inspired by a photo of Bernhardt as Mélissinde in Rostand’s *La Princesse lointaine* (1895). Busch’s channeling of Bernhardt through the character of Bethulia (which also makes a subtle and exclusive reference to his role of the Virgin Sacrifice in *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*) through the histrionic version of himself as a touring actress magnifies Ludlam’s traditional method of palimpsest as performance. The fetishizing of Bernhardt harkens back to the diva worship that was a staple of the Ridiculous in its nascence.

After a series of incredibly popular shows, Busch wrote and starred in *The Tribute Artist* (2014), also at Primary Stages. Relying on his traditional formula of using references from the divas of the silver screen, a dragged-up Busch as Jimmy as female impersonator of those famous dames added Julie Halston to the mix, as Rita, the aide-de-camp who explains all of the esoteric references for a contemporary audience. This became a sort of performative footnoting in performance. This new approach is successful in attempting to bring gay cultural references to a new generation, and it received a rave review from Ben Brantley in the *New York Times*. Although I first read this approach as a kind of betrayal to the Ridiculous spirit, after further consideration I read his craft as wise dramaturgy. More than any other artist in this particular book, Busch is the most adept at hovering between a Ridiculous past and present, carefully introducing a new audience to the old-Hollywood references that both he and Ludlam loved, while still charging forward with new work that is both sentimental and contemporary without the nostalgia that weighs down the work of other Ludlam contemporaries like Everett Quinton. In this vein, Busch is a master at writing different plays for different audiences. While plays like *Judith of Bethulia* maintain the formulaic Camp crassness of the 1980s East Village for a downtown audience, other plays like *The Tribute Artist* are shaped for an uptown audience and the potential for a more commercial and subsequently lucrative run. Busch’s productions have been a regular feature at Theatre for a New City (downtown) for over twenty years while he has also been a regular at Manhattan Theatre Club and Primary Stages (uptown). Perhaps this is all part of Busch’s ruse as a gender illusionist, playing ironically with the Ridiculous genre across communities, sometimes weird and boundary
pushing and sometimes couched in a more digestible way that is no less queer in intent. Busch has also moved beyond Manhattan, bravely taking his solo drag cabaret act to the most conservative spots in America, like megachurch-filled Colorado Springs, Colorado. Busch’s recent works invite an entirely new dialogue (and likely an entire book) on what it means to mainstream queer identity and queer performance.