Hollywood or Sodom: A conversation about Charles Busch's rich career

Charalampos Keivanidis

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Biography of the interviewee
[from his website: https://www.charlesbusch.com/biography]

Charles Busch has forged a unique place in the world of entertainment as playwright, actor, director, novelist, cabaret performer and drag icon. He is the author and star of over twenty-five plays including *The Divine Sister*, *The Lady in Question*, *Red Scare on Sunset*, *The Tribute Artist, The Confession of Lily Dare* and *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, one of the longest running plays in the history of Off-Broadway. His play *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* ran for 777 performances on Broadway, won the Outer Circle Critics' John L. Gassner Award for playwrighting, received a Tony nomination for Best Play and is the longest running Broadway comedy of the past twenty-five years.
He wrote and starred in the film versions of his plays, *Psycho Beach Party* and *Die Mommie Die*, the latter of which won him the Best Performance Award at the Sundance Film Festival. For two seasons, he appeared as Nat Ginzburg on the HBO series *OZ* and is the author of the auto-biographical novel *Whores of Lost Atlantis*. He has directed two films: the Showtime short subject, *Personal Assistant*, and a feature, *A Very Serious Person*, which won an honorable mention at the Tribeca Film Festival. Due to his love and knowledge of film and theatre history, he has appeared as a guest programmer and in numerous documentaries for Turner Classic Movies, and has lectured and conducted master classes at many colleges and universities including NYU, Harvard, UCLA and Amherst College. In 2003, Mr. Busch received a special Drama Desk Award for career achievement as both performer and playwright and was given a star on the Playwrights Walk outside the Lucille Lortel Theatre. He is also the subject of the acclaimed documentary film *The Lady in Question is Charles Busch*.
He is a two-time MAC award winner and has performed his cabaret act in many cities including San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Philadelphia, London, Paris, Barcelona and New York. In winter of 2016, his show *The Lady at the Mic* premiered at Jazz at Lincoln Center's American Songbook series. His first CD, *Charles Busch Live at Feinstein's 54 Below*, was released by Broadway Records.

The interview

Charalampos Keivanidis: Vampire Lesbians of Sodom *had an incredibly long run, both off-off and off-Broadway.*
Charles Busch: Yes, really off-Broadway because we only did it a handful of times off-off-Broadway, then we transferred it to a commercial production off-Broadway and there it had five years.

CK: Yes and it was one of off-Broadway's longest-running plays.
Charles Busch: Longest running plays — not musicals but plays.

CK: But it started in The Limbo Lounge — right? — which was an art gallery.
Charles Busch: Art gallery/bar.

CK: Yes, and it was tiny! I saw a video of one of the first shows and it actually looked tiny.
Charles Busch: Yes it was tiny! The first time I went over there, you know I grew up in New York City — but most people didn't go over to Alphabet City, it was really kind of scary and undeveloped and even though I'd grown up here, I'd never been east of 1st avenue, I didn't even know there was anything there! And then suddenly things were happening in that neighborhood. I had a friend named Bina Sharif who is a Pakistani performance artist and she invited me to see her do her solo piece at this place called Limbo Lounge, in a scary neighborhood and I was intrigued by her, so I thought I'd go over there. I'd had my roommate, Ken Elliot, go with me because it was kind of scary.

CK: I remember how you described this in Whores of Lost Atlantis —
Charles Busch: Yes, that was really true. But it was a fascinating neighborhood in those days because on one hand it really was kind of ruins that had been completely ungentrified and yet, because there was cheap rent to be found at the time and so there were just little pockets, edgy art galleries or dance spaces; so things were just starting to happen there I guess. Artist Keith Haring, I think, came out of that ambiance. So yes, we went over there and I just was totally enraptured with the whole thing. I was kind of naive in a way and here I thought I was so sophisticated, but you know, just to be in this tiny storefront that was the whole place was kind of an art installation.

CK: And that was changing regularly.
Charles Busch: Yes, it changed regularly. It was just barely set up for performance, there was no platform or anything — I think Bina was on the same level as us. A lot of people were just sitting on the floor because there were only a couple of banquettes.

CK: And there was no place to change costumes.
Charles Busch: No, no, really it was not set up as a theater at all and that became a bit of a problem for us later. But at the time, I got a kick out of the whole thing, the primitive aspect of it, all these things surrounding me and the crowd itself was just very young. In the '70s, post-Stonewall, suddenly there were "gay restaurants" and "gay bookstores", we were all kind of segregated but there never had been this stuff before and so it was just so funny how we

thought that was all so marvelous but in a certain sense ultimately, you don't need to have gay restaurants because every restaurant is sort of gay, or gay theater. Unfortunately, for something like with gay bookstores, gay bookstores were a really good meeting place for people and there was a flowering of gay fiction in the early '80s. I think now it's very difficult for gay books — it's difficult for any book, but particularly gay books, to find a place at Barnes & Noble or wherever bookstores are. We're back to serve one shelf.

CK: Yes, I think there's only one gay bookstore left in New York. But there are very few bookstores left.
Charles Busch: There's no bookstores anyway, for anyone, yes. So I was used to this separation: gay people only go to gay bars and gay restaurants and all that. And it was interesting to me at The Limbo Lounge was that it seemed quite gay, but maybe not necessarily and they were kind of goth and kind of punk and sort of gay but maybe sort of straight. It was just so interesting because I wasn't used to it, I was used to being segregated. It amused me too, to overhear the conversations around me, you would have fit in perfectly because everyone had a little bit of an accent that they were faking. All these American kids were [accent] sort of talking with a slight accent. Where the hell are they from? Pittsburgh! It seemed that they were all artists speaking in this kind of way. It was very interesting, so I can't separate the performance from the venue : the whole thing fascinated me.

CK: If I understand correctly, what you're saying is all this atmosphere also had an impact — or some impact — on the freedom [in writing and performing]. So do you think that the gentrification that followed afterwards, in the East Village and Manhattan in general during the '90s for example, had an impact on the theater?
Charles Busch: Yes, everything in New York City is influenced by rent. And so gay neighborhoods are all about cheap rent and young people finding some neighborhood that hasn't been gentrified yet. And then gay people make it popular and then the rents go up and they move somewhere else. And now of course there's no place to go, except maybe Brooklyn, but even Brooklyn is gentrified too. Alphabet City, far East Village, had very cheap rent. No one lived there so artists could go and eventually it got gentrified and too expensive, but I guess some people still find some pretty crummy places to live there. But does gentrification change art? A neighborhood like Alphabet City or Greenwich Village, years before, were because artists need cheap rent, therefore wherever they go, it becomes attractive for richer people to come in and then the art leaves.

CK: Also if you have rent to pay, you may be more prone to making some compromises in your work so that you can meet the standards that will make you be able to pay rent.
Charles Busch: I don't know if I agree with that. But often in a career, people start off much edgier and then they get seduced or their goal is more mainstream ultimately. But I don't think people change their art to fit the neighborhood.

CK: You've written two plays, Red Scare on Sunset *and* The Lady in Question*, that were, of course, the perfect vehicle for you to embody this old Hollywood glamour.* Red Scare on Sunset *even borrows subject material from '40s anti-communist cinema, so is this where the*

political aspect of these plays comes from or was there a deliberate statement that you wanted to make?
Charles Busch: I loved those movies, anti-nazi war movies, so *The Lady in Question* was really a hommage to Hollywood patriotism which tried to make certain political points here and there, but I'm not really a political writer.

CK: The political stakes were very clear.
Charles Busch: There were certain things at the time, I think President Reagan went to Bitburg Cemetery in Germany, so I made a little satyrical joke about that. I'm such a non-political writer that when I tried to do these things, I'm such a lame brain! During that time that I wrote *Lady in Question* there was a lot of new-age philosophy, which was very big at the end of the '80s, about how we create everything, how we create our own reality so there was little bit of satyre in that with my character.

CK: This is a line that keeps returning when Kitty gets hung.
Charles Busch: So we wanted to make a little bit of statement about what was going on at the day. However, *Red Scare* really did have a political point of view, which was rare for me. It's my most complex play and that came out of actually just a backstage conversation with my leading man during *Lady in Question*. There was a line where he's saying to me he's very pro-Stalin, because there was a brief period in the '40s where we were with Russia against Hitler. And I said, "Arnie, if we ever did the sequel, your character would be in terrible trouble just a few years later for being a communist sympathizer". That got me thinking about *Red Scare* and the McCarthy era which has always interested me. So I started thinking about it but I didn't really see much humor in making it about it a leftist person who's hounded out of their career. It didn't seem terribly amusing but I thought it would be interesting to flip it and make it this right-wing nightmare. What if everything that the right-right thought of Hollywood was totally true and this actress, to her horror, sees this conspiracy around her and everybody's involved? I thought there could be exaggerated fun in that as opposed to doing it from the leftist point of view. And also I thought — and it's certainly quite relevant today — I did think it was interesting that with gay people that both right and left — the extreme right and the extreme left — had trouble with the idea of homosexuality.

CK: Exactly.
Charles Busch: And both extreme sides would like to curtail personal freedoms and of course as we see today with — I hate using the word "woke" because it's used against us by the right — but there is this feeling of both extremes that don't want any conversation.

CK: It is well pointed-out in the play as well.
Charles Busch: That was just interesting… Michael Feingold, who passed away recently, wrote for the Village Voice — Village Voice never was really helpful to me at all. In forty years, I only got two good reviews and one of them was *Red Scare* and he wrote so eloquently about it. His review helped me understand what I wrote: it was all there, but he articulated it. It was such a complex, intellectual review. I showed it to my aunt and she said, "Your play

really has all that in it?". I said, "Yes, I think it does!". That was it really. One could say I'm a political writer just by…

CK: Definition.
Charles Busch: Yes, I shake things up by the gender complexity of what I do.

CK: Even Vampire Lesbians of Sodom *has political elements in it if you think about it.*
Charles Busch: Sometimes it frustrated me a bit back in the day. I thought my plays are actually more interesting than I was given credit for because I was doing it in camp.

CK: You mean the press?
Charles Busch: The critics, yes.

CK: Because otherwise the public was crazy about, not only about Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, but that was a huge hit.*
Charles Busch: But I'm saying intellectually I sometimes felt that critics didn't give me much credit for being too intelligent. It was mostly, "Oh, he did 'Hooray for Hollywood', he loves old movies and he's really funny, and it's camp, but kind of brainless". Sometimes it frustrated me because if they would take the trouble to look, I'm smarter than you think. They couldn't get past the camp humor.

CK: And it's still the case for not only you but others : if you're categorized as camp, you're done. They don't have anything else to say other than that.
Charles Busch: It's easy to label you and the fact too that, I was presenting a glamorous image of drag. So much of our style, as drag performers, comes from who our "physical presence" is. Charles Ludlam who came just before me was a big influence on me. He had very masculine features and that was not pretty and therefore there was no element of illusion going on there; that was not what he was about, that was not what he was selling. When I first started doing drag in college, just the fact that I'm small and have regular features, in drag I could approximate what the lady that I was trying to be [looked like]. I could give the illusion of Norma Shearer or Garbo or these different people. That interested me. I was also interested in costume design. Therefore, my style of drag play had more of a kind of realism to it. The cast looked like what they were supposed to be, the set, the actors, everything looked like they would fit in to a 1940s movie. And then we could go off and exaggerate and do a bit more vulgar or bawdy. But we gave the illusion of the old movie.

CK: This is exactly what I was going to ask you. Charles Ludlam said once that in auditions he was always told that his playing was "too gay", so what he did was start writing roles for himself.
Charles Busch: That's what inspired me: seeing him.

CK: You also wrote plays for yourself and the troupe. But what that your motive as well? To write roles that you wouldn't otherwise be given in, say, commercial theater?

Charles Busch: My dream was to be an actor, to be onstage. Trying to think back, there really never were roles that I dreamed of playing. I just wanted to be onstage but I never really was cast in anything. But I got into this very good university, the Northwestern, in the Theater Department, but again I was never cast in a play, I was just too — I guess — effeminate and androgynous. There really were, for the most part, no roles I wanted to play that I thought I was right for. There was no gay literature, there were no plays like *Torch Song* [*Trilogy*]. It was too soon for me to say, "Oh, I could play Arnold", and "I could play Prior", "I could play solo-show *Buyer & Cellar*, I could do that" but those hadn't been written yet. *Boys in the Band*, people were doing that... I first saw Ludlam, when I was in high school, because I grew up here and then I started seeing him regularly and it was like being awakened from slumber.

CK: It opened perspectives.
Charles Busch: Yes, to see that this guy was creating roles for himself and for his company according to his own esthetic, which I seemed to share, of classic film and opera and 19th century theater, all these things that I was fascinated by and that he was taking elements from. Men playing female characters: I'd never seen that before! All the options of creating your own theater. I grew up going to Broadway shows since I was 7 years old. But they were very traditional musicals and plays and then to see Ludlam... And then, to a lesser degree, there were other avant-garde companies too. But with Ludlam it was like, "This is who I am!". But there were other things too: The Performance Group, where it was somebody's vision that is so personal and has nothing to do with commercial theater. It was an awakening. I'd always written: I was writing full-length plays at 11 years old. I completely understand why it took me all the way to 19 years old to figure out that this is what I should be doing! But Ludlam's example made it clear that I am a writer and so I should write roles for myself.

CK: It made it legitimate.
Charles Busch: Yes, but it made it a possibility.

CK: Yes, that what I'm saying.
Charles Busch: It turned me, at a very early age, away from the idea that theater has to be a commercial thing, that my goal must be to win a Tony award or my goal is to be on Broadway. Right away I started not thinking in those terms at all but just doing something kind of marvelous and giving myself wonderful opportunities to be onstage and live out fantasy roles and all that.

CK: Like other drag artists, you don't mention AIDS in any of you plays, even though you describe Mamacita's final days in Whores of Lost Atlantis*.*
Charles Busch: I mostly did period pieces. I don't think I ever did a contemporary play during the AIDS crisis. It could have, I guess, infiltrate in a period piece but I was so busy living it. I think my plays back then with Theatre Limbo were an escape for me as well as for the audience. That was our war, that was our World War II.

CK: I kept thinking about specifically Vampire Lesbians of Sodom *that there were several elements that could — perhaps — point to AIDS, because these were vampires, the connection*

with blood and the myriad lovers each of them had. I've scrutinized the play but I'm still not sure.
Charles Busch: We can always find something in anything, but it certainly was not my intention at all. That's an interesting question though. I don't think any of my plays could be an AIDS metaphor — it really would be stretching it. But I see where one could try to go down that path with *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* but frankly, the blood aspect of vampirism never interested me at all. It was just more the idea of eternal life that amused me and the concept that these characters are actresses first, vampires second. Their career was all that mattered, with their competitiveness they would be like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford but instead of being 30 years, it's 2000 years. I was interested in the idea of stardom and actresses that go on to have long careers and have to keep evolving and changing their images to suit the times. If you look at someone like Joan Crawford who kept evolving from being sort of a "jazz baby" to the '30s tortured kind of shopgirl, to becoming stronger and more indomitable in funny horror movies as the last stop. I was always intrigued by it, so therefore, I could make them vampires, so they were always adjusting to the 17the century, 19th century, the 20th...so that was fun. The decade of AIDS seemed to really involve my life, my world from '82 to '95 approximately. It was so terrifying when we first would hear about it. There came a rumor, [low voice] "Did you hear that guy, that bartender, the handsome one, the real cute bartender with the Duplex, yeah somebody said he just like died, all of a sudden his body fell apart", and then, "Oh, did you hear, that publicist was very ill, did you hear he died?" and it kept getting closer and closer. Then it finally hit our company: our leading lady died, Meghan [Robinson] and Bobby Carey, our beautiful young man and our choreographer… it just became part of our lives. Any of my plays with our company I think became a great source of escape for the gay community at that time because they had something to laugh about. Suddenly the baths were closed, and just prior to AIDS there was such an S/M-backroom-scene and now they were closing or it just wasn't very cool. Gay men were looking for just another outlet that was non-sexual and our plays, I think, offered an escape.

CK: And for all of you involved as well.
Charles Busch: And for us. These two hours onstage, we were, the audience and the actors, in a collective dream/escape.

CK: Have you got a thing about red?
Charles Busch: [*Laughs*] Why?

CK: Because I see these flaming red walls and you also play these — almost always — redheads…
Charles Busch: One of the first movies I saw was *Gone with the Wind* and Belle Watling, the bordello owner, with her red hair and Scarlet in a red velvet dress when she goes to Melanie's party… I think in Belle Watling's bordello there was a lot of red. I was very impressionable toward color as a kid and the movies that I saw that made such an impact on me often were colored films of the movie *Gipsy* — I remember the vivid colors. I was always attracted to Chinese red, the red in the movie *Gigi*, all that seemed so lush. I was fascinated as a kid by bordellos and brothels basically from movies but also seen in the paintings of [Toulouse-]

Lautrec. I always wanted to live in a place that looked like a brothel [*laughs*]. It all seemed so glamorous and vivid — and now I do! [*laughs*]

CK: Ah! That explains a few items! [laughs] It all makes sense now!
Charles Busch: I keep adding more and more red — it's opulent and romantic and intense. I wouldn't care to live in an atmosphere that's very cool and earth-tones.

CK: Minimalist.
Charles Busch: Minimalist is not who I am at all. I always wanted to live in the *Wizard of Oz,* Professor Marvel's caravan. yeah. It'd be so beautiful, living in a caravan.

CK: So, you've done everything: you've written a lot of plays, you performed in most of them, you've played both feminine and — a very few times — masculine roles.
Charles Busch: I don't fancy or care for them too much.

CK: But you've tried them.
Charles Busch: Tried — that'd be good for me.

CK: You've done three outrageous movies, you wrote a novel that — as I told you — I love, it's the funniest thing I've read in my life.
Charles Busch: I have a new book coming out August 29th, it's my memoirs.

CK: This was actually my question: what are your current projects? What's in store for your audience?
Charles Busch: I have plenty of things happening. I thought I was moving towards semi-retirement and I might be but until then I've got a lot of good things going on.

CK: Recently you seemed much more interested in cabaret and singing.
Charles Busch: I dipped my foot into cabaret numerous times in my career, when I was just starting out, because where do you start, I hadn't yet become a playwright/drag legend — and I was a solo performer not in drag, like in *Whores of Lost Atlantis*.

CK: Exactly.
Charles Busch: I was dressed in neutral costume playing different characters. I'd gotten into cabaret because I wanted to be in the theater but how do you do a one-man show in the theater with no money? But I could book myself in some little cabaret down here [in the West Village] even though the piece I was doing wasn't really suitable for cabaret: there's no music or anything, it's not stand-up. But I did. I did that for a couple of years. Then I got into cabaret again in the early '90s when there was a lot of AIDS benefits and so I ended up doing a one-night cabaret review as an AIDS benefit and I really enjoyed it. I was fitting many costumes in my attempts to being so Josephine Baker and I kept changing clothes all the time. So, for about two years I was booking myself doing that and then about 12 years ago maybe — occasionally I would do one song with some fundraiser or something, and this fella Seth Rudetsky, who's a musical director, would interview people onstage and then you'd sing a

song or two, as you were telling your story. So I did that a couple of times and his manager said, "I could book you on this gay cruise but they want a whole act and they want you in drag". And I hadn't done that for so many years and it was a lot of money, so I called a friend of mine, Tom Judson, who I've known for many years as a lot of fun and very good musician, accompanist and suggested we do it once. So we did it and we started getting other bookings and it was always a fun thing. This time the focus really was on singing which I'd never really quite done and the more we did it, the more the singing became the most important part of the show. I was in drag just because I assumed that my audience would want to see me in drag and there's something about cabaret that's feminine to me — you know, the lady at the mike: Judy Garland, Shirley Bassey, [Edith] Piaf — that's feminine and not masculine. I have to have some intellectual reason for being in drag: I'm playing a female character, I'm embodying a certain kind of lady from a movie and I never really could understand why I was in drag in my cabaret act because they're introducing me as Charles Busch but then I come out in drag and I'm telling stories about my life and I'm singing Stephen Sondheim and Michel Legrand. So why am I in drag? But OK, why not? Then about six years ago maybe, it seemed fake to me, it didn't seem right. So I thought, I'm going to try doing the show not in drag and I saw no difference at all. The look ended up evolving in the show. I would be wearing these androgynous suits I had made in green paisley with rhinestone buttons and a lot of eye make-up and it was kind of a non-binary look basically. That was really fun. I'm going to do two nights in April at 54 Below. I also have this new play that we'll do, I believe, in the fall, I haven't got the exact dates yet. It's a very ambitious part. I am so vacillated on it… I'm terrified of the whole thing.

CK: What is it about?
Charles Busch: It's funny, it just doesn't sound funny! It's loosely based on the life of Ibsen's widow, Suzannah Ibsen. Oh, you're laughing already! It's about Ibsen's widow, a few weeks after his state funeral. She's very much like a heroine out of one of his plays and her whole system of illusions of her role as the keeper of the flame, and all is shattered by this woman who shows up, who she knew many years before and was the model for Nora in *A Doll's House*. Ibsen basically took her story and abandoned her in her time of need because of the scandal and now she has a diary that is going to be published and exposes Ibsen as a hypocrite. And my marriage has been a sterile, sexless marriage. The other big event is that Ibsen has had an illegitimate son who he never met and so in this play he returns. He's a sailor in his forties, he shows up and ends up seducing the widow, and he awakens her sexually in a way she's never known, so then I — the widow, Suzannah — she enlists his aid that he must break into the hotel room where this woman is staying and steal the diary and destroy it, for his father's legacy and for me. I'm really excited about it, it's one of my favorite things but it's just such a big part and I hope I have the stamina to memorize all those lines. So I thought a few weeks ago, what of this other part in the play, the stepmother — that's a marvelous role — could I be happy playing that part, the supporting role and get someone else to play the lead? I thought I'll make it a better part! There's a big stretch where she was offstage and I could put her act one or two scenes also.

CK: That's exactly what I was thinking.

Charles Busch: So I made it a better part and it makes a better play but what I do is so specific and I just don't think there's an actress who could do it. One of the things that I do, my gift, is that I evoke other actresses while I'm playing the role. I'm playing it very honestly and yet there are echoes of this actress and this actress and this actress… And nobody else can really do that. I wouldn't cast a drag actor in the part and a biological woman — they don't do that, that's not what they do and that part of the humor of the play would be missing. I'm trying to memorize it now, it's not until next October. I'm trying to see if I can do it. Then my book, my memoir, is coming out August 29th. And there's also this movie we're trying to get made.

CK: Will it be as outrageous as the other ones?
Charles Busch: We have this movie that we made during Covid, called *The Sixth Reel*. It's a caper movie where Julie Halston and I are in crazy disguises and run around the Village and try to steal this old movie reel. It's zany, but it's not a spoof of a movie genre. This other movie that we wanted to get made was a play I wrote that was never performed and makes a better movie script than a play. It's called *Visitors in the Dark* and we never performed it. It takes place during the 1965 New York City blackout, in this neighborhood. I play a female character but it's not a parody, it's a naturalistic character. She's a flamboyant lady, she's a painter who lives hand to mouth in this crummy apartment on West 12th St and she totally believes that when she was a child, aliens from outer space visited her and they gave her the gift of drawing, they bathed her hands and from then on she was the girl who drew. She felt all her life that the promise was that they were going to return someday for her. So she has dreamed for 60 years and now she's convinced that the blackout is because they're coming — the visitors are coming — and they're going to land on the roof of her building. Her big dilemma is that the only one who has access to the roof garden is her sworn enemy, this retired French cabaret entertainer who lives up there and she somehow has to patch it up with her, even though they hate each other, so she can get access to the roof. I hope we can get it made!

CK: You have a lot of things coming!
Charles Busch: For somebody who thinks they're retired, I'm not so retired! I'm only happy when I'm being creative.

CK: Thank you for this most insightful and amusing conversation!
Charles Busch: Thank you.