

Nothing's Sacred

Charles Busch, Who Retooled Boy George's *Taboo*, Has Carved a Successful Niche by Being Himself

By Bob Johnson
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Charles Busch has been a fixture in the New York theater scene for almost two decades. As the end of October approaches, Busch has a host of treats on his plate. His musical *Taboo* will be in previews, and his new movie, *Die, Mommie, Die!* opens on Halloween.

He's been on quite a journey since his college days at Northwestern University. He originally wanted to act but became a writer out of necessity.

"I learned really quickly in college that I was sort of an offbeat type," he said during an interview in his West Village apartment. "I was not going to have a mainstream career; it didn't really interest me.

"Not only was I not being cast in college, but I was also thinking that there weren't any roles that I wanted to play ... the thought of playing Biff in *Death of a Salesman* wasn't the be-all and end-all for me.

"I began writing roles for myself because I honestly believed that I had something to offer and that there was a place for me in theater."

So he started writing material for himself and performed it all over the country from 1978 until 1984. By the time *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* opened in New York City, he had become a polished performer and seasoned writer.

Since then, he's written a plethora of plays, including Manhattan Theatre Club's Broadway outing *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife*, and is writing the book for his first Broadway musical.

Rosie O'Donnell hired him to rewrite the book to the London hit *Taboo*, which is about (and stars) 1980s pop icon Boy George.

"*Taboo* is a realistic musical about outrageous, campy people," Busch said. "One story is about a young man who becomes a rock star and ends up fighting the same demons that have haunted him all his life. The other is about a brilliant performance artist who's desperate for fame but is just too original for the mainstream."

After seeing the London production with O'Donnell, he decided that he could offer his talents to the project.

The hitch, though, was that Boy George had to be willing to go where Busch wanted to go. So O'Donnell and Busch returned to London to present Busch's new ideas for the piece.

"I was kinda nervous," he said. "I was in a very weird position. I was this

strange American coming in and telling him my fantasy of his life and my interpretation of what his personal problems were and my interpretation of why he got into heroin and my interpretation of how he got off of it."

How did Boy George react? Well ... he is starring in the musical, which opens next month on Broadway (but he's not playing himself).

But before *Taboo* begins, *Die, Mommie, Die!* (written by and starring Busch) will receive its New York City premiere. In the film, Busch plays a woman who's involved in an elaborate, murderous masquerade.

Not only does he give a tour-de-force performance in a fabulously funny role, but he gets to lock lips with 90210 teen icon Jason Priestly.

Was Busch nervous for his big love scene? You bet.

"I got all rabbit-y and twitchy and self-conscience. I had never kissed anyone onscreen before ... I was all weirded out."

Priestly took charge of the situation and said, "Dude, this is what you do: I'm gonna take your head like this, and then I'm gonna tilt you to the side so



Karma Chameleon: Charles Busch does it all

they can see both of our faces, then I'm gonna kiss ya."

According to Busch, the kiss was over rather quickly (he got only two takes out of it), but Priestly was "the most ardent screen lover."

When audiences get the chance to see Busch on a large screen in glorious Technicolor, audiences will finally see how the cameras fall in love with Busch.

"Not since Lucy in *Mame*," Busch said, "has there been so much soft focus on a lens." ■

Visit Charles Busch online at charlesbusch.com.