Ridiculous Geographies: Mapping the Theatre of the Ridiculous as Radical Aesthetic

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Ridiculous Geographies:
Mapping the Theatre of the Ridiculous as Radical Aesthetic

by

Kelly Aliano

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Ridiculous Geographies: 
Mapping the Theatre of the Ridiculous as Radical Aesthetic

by

Kelly Aliano

Adviser: Professor James Wilson

This dissertation is a comprehensive study of the artists associated with the Theatre of the Ridiculous. The discussion begins with Charles Ludlam, the most famous practitioner of the form and then extends to artists with whom he collaborated, including Jack Smith, the Play-House of the Ridiculous, Ethyl Eichelberger, and Charles Busch. The argument traces the overlapping aesthetic qualities of all of these theatre practitioners; they all shared a reverence for popular culture of the twentieth century; they all blended references from high and low culture in their dramaturgy; and they all created performances that took a unique approach to cross-dressed performance. The objective of this project is to “map” the Theatre of the Ridiculous in order to display that it was a coherent and cohesive theatrical movement that contained a radical, queer quality.

To do this, this dissertation engages Ludlam as a kind of apotheosis of Ridiculous play making, displaying how his works exemplified all three of these key aesthetic elements. Then, the discussion turns to Ludlam’s inspiration, experimental artist Jack Smith, who was preoccupied to the point of obsession with twentieth-century cinema. I then look at the Play-House of the Ridiculous, headed by director John Vaccaro and playwrights Ronald Tavel and Kenneth Bernard, as the site for the genesis of Ridiculous
Theatre. Here, I highlight a preoccupation with textual collaging, or remixing, in playwriting, especially insofar as it valued popular references alongside of or even over highbrow ones. I then study gender performance in the Ridiculous, looking at the mashed up performances of Ethyl Eichelberger, which create identities that defy gender categorization. Finally, I consider the legacy of the Ridiculous, tracing both direct inheritors of the form as well as those whose more contemporary work appears influence by it.
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Although I will be the one they call “Dr. Kelly,” the achievement that is this dissertation is shared entirely with Henry Borriello, my partner in life and in love. Without his unending support and encouragement, I could not have completed graduate school. I only hope someday to live up to his vision of me.

***

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is forever indebted to her influence. She always not only encouraged but also engaged in my every interest, and without her, I might never have seen *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* or gotten an autograph from Charles Busch. She was my first and greatest friend and the sadness of completing my doctorate is that I will never be able to share it with her. I hope she would have been proud of me. She was a strong and beautiful person and I am so proud of her and so thankful that she was my mother. I miss her everyday and I dedicate this work to her memory.
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Introduction

“Ridiculous Cartography”: Finding My Way Through the Ridiculous Geography

“The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others...”

This dissertation is haunted—haunted by a past that has largely been forgotten but which it attempts to reconstruct; haunted by a cache of artists decimated by the AIDS crisis, no longer able to write their own story into the history of American drama; haunted by a Downtown New York City landscape that has been buried beneath decades of decay and rebirth, gentrification and so-called “NYU-ification.” It is haunted by a past that I neither experienced nor even lived through, yet, from the moment of my first encounter with, felt drawn to. I needed to return to these Ridiculous sites, long since replaced with all sorts of other storefronts and theatres, apartment complexes, and chic restaurants and bars. I had to understand where these places were in order to try to comprehend who these people were. Location somehow seemed to define the kind of art that they created and therefore who I thought them to be.

I have often felt quite close to these artists, though most I have never seen in person, much less ever met. The question I was most often asked as I described this project was whether I ever saw any of these productions live. My common response, “I was three when Charles Ludlam died,” makes it clear that I could not possibly have lived this history for myself. This landscape was not my own, these artists were not my

contemporaries. Yet Ludlam, especially, feels like my kindred spirit, a kid from Long Island who ran off to the city to try to make his mark in the New York theatre scene.

Ludlam found his place below Fourteenth Street with a motley crew of great visionaries and two-bit hack performers, looking to make art for its own sake—the pleasure of performing as an end almost in and of itself. I found a less forgiving Downtown Scene in the early 2000s when I began my New York City theatre education. Rather than an “Underground Playground” (to riff on Stephen J. Bottoms’s terminology), there was a rigid hierarchy of theatrical spaces and productions already in place; rather than room to experiment and play for its own sake, there was a need to innovate in order to capitalize, to make profits. Upon discovering the Theatre of the Ridiculous, I discovered what I wanted was not the theatre scene of my own youth; rather, I was trying to recapture a moment that had long since passed. My “Midnight in Paris”\(^2\) fantasy will forever be the hope of a late-1960s era cab turning past Sheridan Square, picking me up and whisking me off to a Greenwich Village more than a generation my predecessor.

Writing about the Ridiculous is inherently a journey to the past, an almost archaeological attempt to reconstruct something that defies reconstruction. There is so much about the Ridiculous that is purely a product of its own time: shows could be put on just about anywhere because rents were quite inexpensive by today’s standards; artists were to be found everywhere, because New York seemed the only logical place to run off to, especially for these predominantly gay male individuals; countercultural ideas were in the air, with Civil Rights, Women’s Liberation, and the burgeoning Gay and Lesbian

\(^2\) I am referencing the 2011 film directed by Woody Allen, starring Owen Wilson and Rachel McAdams. In the film, Wilson’s character, Gil, romanticizes Paris of the 1920s and is transported back to that time when he encounters a mysterious taxicab at midnight.
Rights Movement all hitting their stride during the decade preceding the height of the Ridiculous Theatre. A perfect blend of factors came together to make this work possible for a brief—at most, perhaps thirty-five year—period of time.

Yet, the disappearance of the Ridiculous is almost as remarkable as its birth. Unlike other theatrical “-isms” and styles, the Ridiculous is largely overlooked in surveys of the history of the theatre. In this sense, Ridiculous Theatre truly does haunt studies of American drama; it is almost present, just barely perceptible, yet just as often dismissed, forgotten, or outright ignored. Consider this mention in the supposedly seminal theatre history textbook, Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy’s *History of the Theatre*; on a listing of well-known off-Broadway theatres that “went bankrupt in the 1990s,” the Ridiculous Theatrical Company is said to have been “founded by Robert Ludlum”\(^3\) who is actually the author of the Jason Bourne novels, not a queer playwright/actor/director. Even Charles Ludlam, perhaps the only major theatrical figure to come out of the Ridiculous, is mistaken for someone else. The memory of this movement is vague and prone to errors.

On the other hand, this is an easy editorial mistake to make: their names sound alike and who would really know Ludlam well enough not to conflate him with a more recognizable figure with a similar name? However, such a statement begs the important question: why is Ludlam still so unknown, despite his remarkable achievement in the American theatre of writing, directing, producing, and starring in 29 of his own original plays? Is his work so inherently queer it cannot play to a mainstream audience? Such a case might be made for certain Ridiculous artists—Jack Smith, for example, created extremely esoteric and abstract works that even this so-called Ridiculous connoisseur

cannot exactly claim to “get”—but Ludlam’s plays, by and large, are farces, and a play like *The Mystery of Irma Vep* (1984) is still regularly performed.

Is the lack of Ridiculous studies due to the toll of the AIDS crisis, then, which wiped away many of the key figures associated with the movement—including icon Ludlam—at their prime of artistic creativity? This seems a more likely explanation, though many of these artists, like Ludlam and Smith, are regularly credited by later artists as inspirations or visionaries. Their presence continues to haunt contemporary theatre; their existences are not so easily cast out, even in death.

I believe both of these factors are significant to understanding why we do not regularly address Ridiculous Theatre in our discussions of the progressions of American or even experimental drama. Yet, my hypothesis is not just that the Ridiculous is largely overlooked both because it is “queer” (an overused term) and because of the toll that AIDS took on its artists. I value these factors only insofar as they were aspects of the larger reason that I believe that Ridiculous Theatre has not been as significant as, say, Theatre of the Absurd, or Dadaism. The Ridiculous is, in my view (and almost by design), too Downtown New York, too late-1960s, too embedded in its own creators’ idiosyncratic pop culture interests to play either to a large mainstream audience or even to some degree outside of its own historical moment and community of audience members. It could be seen as a product of its particular historical moment, one that perhaps does not have the universal resonances that have allowed other movements to stand the test of time.

However, it is also my view that to ignore or overlook this movement is not only a shame for our pleasure in performance (these shows must be delightful to watch!) but
also because it skews our understanding of how the plays and performances from the 1990s onward came to be. Tony Kushner did not create *Angels in America* in a vacuum; he was deeply influenced by Ludlam, who was deeply influenced by Jack Smith, and so on. In order to understand contemporary drama, especially “queer” or “experimental” drama, the story of the past must be told in full. Many of the groundbreaking elements seen in later artists’ works were actually developed in and by the Theatre of the Ridiculous; the Ridiculous has haunted the study of American experimental performance for decades without scholars realizing it.

My project is not to explain why the Ridiculous ended when it did—or indeed even to explore precisely why it was born when it was. Rather, I am interested in uncovering what it was, in its own historical moment: who were its key players and what aesthetic elements did they bring to the style. In this sense, I am embracing the ghosts of the Ridiculous and trying to bring them to life once again in the pages of this dissertation. I do not claim this as the seminal work on these artists; indeed, I hope it is not, so that others may continue to investigate this important movement as a movement, not just as a style or aesthetic element of other more commonly discussed forms of performance or culture, like Pop Art. I argue that the Ridiculous was a cohesive movement because it was a direct product of particular artists working in a particular location at a particular moment in historical time. Because of this unique collusion of events, the Ridiculous was born, a specific theatrical movement, containing very specific aesthetic markers that separate it from any and all other experimental work of the period and beyond.

To achieve this end, I spend the duration of this dissertation outlining the key “sites” of the Ridiculous: its geography, so to speak. I travel between iconic locations of
the Ridiculous, marking these spaces as much by physical space as by artist and artistic contribution. My map is intended not only to draw attention to the literal presence of this movement—a ghost no longer—but to provide a framework for discussing this movement, applying terminology often associated with later forms of artistic construction, such as remix and mash-up. I value legacy insofar as it is a way to remember and recover this work, but not as a direct trajectory of a Ridiculous continuum. I use the present only to understand how it is adapted from—and how it diverges from—its artistic predecessors.

In the limited manner in which the Ridiculous has heretofore been studied, the emphasis has been on Charles Ludlam and artists with whom he worked or who were associated with his Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Because of this perspective, people tend to think that the Ridiculous was a self-contained body of work and system of production, limited to only these very specific theatre practitioners. This is a misconception that deserves to be corrected. Many artists worked in a similar aesthetic to the one that Ludlam employed. In this dissertation I show that the Ridiculous was much larger than the creation of a single small group of theatre practitioners; its influences extended throughout the downtown scene in the late-1960s and into the 1970s and 80s.

There is a lack of scholarship that takes a contextual perspective to studying the Ridiculous; the few works that do address the Ridiculous discuss it historically, usually emphasizing its role in the development of drag performance. A study of this aesthetic is not only crucial for the deeper understanding that it will give us about this particular historical period, but also for the theoretical framework it will provide us for studying subsequent artists and their contributions. I believe that it is important to consider the
geographical reach of the aesthetic associated with the Ridiculous in order to prove that the Ridiculous, which is often overlooked in studies of the history of American drama, constitutes a significant artistic movement.

Important markers of this theatrical aesthetic include playing with the constructs of gender, fooling around with theatrical conventions, and the melding of highbrow and lowbrow culture. Also key to the Ridiculous style is an interest in what I will refer to as a style of “remix”; this includes various practices of borrowing, referencing, quoting, or sampling from other people’s works in order to create a complex cultural layering of elements from all strata of society. This mixing of cultural elements creates a varied performance landscape as opposed to a singular artistic style. In addition, borrowing from all areas of culture allows the borders of these Ridiculous spaces to be fluid; anything and everything can be welcomed (and/or mocked) in these performances. The sense of spatiality in Ridiculous performances is built upon its use of citations from other works.

I frame this dissertation around writers and artists who self-consciously used the term “Ridiculous” to describe their work, but I will also discuss some artists whose style is in line with the type used in the Play-House of the Ridiculous and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company even if they did not explicitly apply the term “Ridiculous” to their artistic output. Jack Smith, for example, may not have used the term to describe his work, but he embodies the aesthetic that I am exploring. I use this survey of aesthetic overlaps in order to argue that these important elements can be understood as a form of contextual “space,” and I then attempt to ascertain what the shape of that space might be: is it radical, queer, progressive, regressive? The Ridiculous aesthetic, which is the focus
of this dissertation, is important to study because of its significance in its own historical moment as well as its rich legacy that extends into our own time.

The study of context is meant, ultimately, to discover the political significance of the Ridiculous. I am drawing on the argument that Stephen J. Bottoms proposes in *Playing Underground*. Bottoms designates this work as “underground,” suggesting that this indicates a “relative disregard of ‘agendas,’ whether political or aesthetic” as well as an “‘underground’ disregard for conventional wisdoms and categories, and … playful blurring of borders between artistic ‘isms.’” Bottoms contends that work from the downtown scene during this period, which includes all manifestations of the Ridiculous being addressed in this dissertation, is interested in how to alter the conceptions of how to make art, not in promoting or condemning particular political agendas, platforms, or ideas. From this perspective, these artists positioned themselves outside of the system entirely, rather than standing opposed to the system (as might be implied in the term “countercultural”). One way to consider the work of the Ridiculous is to highlight the artists’ interest solely in making art and their aesthetic choices, which went against the grain of the mainstream culture, as their only attempt at action.

I explore how the notion of “space” is related to this progressive potential of the Ridiculous. One way to do this, then, is literally: I will consider how and to what degree these locations, as places of performance where people came together to shared a live and lived experience, were politicized spaces. I am borrowing this idea from both Don Shewey’s “‘Be True to Yearning’: Notes on the Pioneers of Queer Theater” and

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5 Ibid., 14.
“‘Preaching to the Converted’” by David Román and Tim Miller. In both essays, there is the contention that gay people coming together in a shared space can have political valence. For Shewey, what is progressive about queer performance is embedded in the concept of “community.” Shewey describes, “The pioneer theater makers didn’t start from a theoretical or sociopolitical agenda. Their theater making was inseparable from their personal identities, their lives, their social circles, their senses of humor, their need for love and companionship.”6 These underground, queer spaces were important not as sites for proclaiming particular political rhetoric; rather, they were safe spaces in which individuals could be who they were without any negative judgments. As Shewey relates, “The women and men who created queer theaters when none existed before, were looking for a place where their gayness was seen not as an embarrassment, a hindrance, or worse, but as the golden thread in the fabric of their lives.”7

Román and Miller also highlight the importance of building a community through and in the theatre. They state, “The context of the performance plays a crucial role in the aesthetic experience of our theatergoing. Community-based queer theater allows for its terms—community, queer, theater—to coexist without competition or hierarchy.”8 Making art is not valued above bringing people together in these community theatre spaces. The creation of theatre can be seen as an extension of queer artists’ basic social roles as part of the “community” (to use Román and Miller’s terminology).

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7 Ibid., 134.
What, then, was the nature of the kind of theatre that these individuals came together to create? Ridiculous theatre was not didactic nor was it meant to promote or condemn a specific political agenda. Rather, the Ridiculous’s political valence is best summed up by Ridiculous Theatrical Company performer Lola Pashalinski in “From the Invisible to the Ridiculous: The Emergence of an Out Theatre Aesthetic.” She states, “politics doesn’t exist only in direct political theatre, but also in aesthetics.”

The Ridiculous has important stylistic markers that we can highlight: an interest in gender performance, a mixing of cultural material from all strata of society, a preoccupation with the act of performance as opposed to a polished finished product of performance. Could we find a political aspect to this style in which the so-called Ridiculous artists chose to work? Can the work of John Vaccaro, Kenneth Bernard, Ronald Tavel, Charles Ludlam, and others be seen as political, if not as in the same light as the work of more explicitly political groups (such as the Living Theatre or Bread and Puppet), but somehow progressive in a new way or on its own terms?

The term “political” can be vague and may suggest something at odds with the nature of the Ridiculous. Radical, on the other hand, might be interpreted in such a way as to encompass the type of performance being done in these Ridiculous spaces. I am first borrowing “radical” from Baz Kershaw’s The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard. This term is appropriate to my work since Kershaw also emphasizes the physical places of performance as being endemic to their categorization as radical. Kershaw writes, “Contemporary live performance, especially outside theatre

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buildings, is a wonderfully energetic field to tap into in undertaking this task, because as a profoundly public genre it is inevitably thoroughly contaminated by its wider cultural context.”¹⁰ Kershaw suggests that we can learn about the surrounding culture by studying the performances presented. This interest in context mirrors the preoccupation of my dissertation—how the surrounding culture affects the particularities of the performance and vice versa.

In addition, there seems to be something about the interest in play that could link the idea of “queer” performance with a concept of the radical. In Queer Political Performance and Protest, Benjamin Shepard suggests playfulness as being at the heart of important political performance activities throughout the last two decades. Shepard sees “creativity, pleasure, and play in urban protest in general, and queer-community building practice more specifically.”¹¹ By highlighting the presence of the ludic in political performance and activism, Shepard builds a potential bridge for connecting what the Ridiculous artists were doing with the actions of the activist community. If indeed politics may be found in aesthetics, and aesthetic choices from the Ridiculous were being used in more explicitly political ways, then it may be reasonable to suggest that the Ridiculous, too, can be seen as radical.

The connection between play and protest does have historical precedent. Cultural Activism: Practices, Dilemmas, and Possibilities studies the particular crossroads

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¹¹ Benjamin Shepard, Queer Political Performance and Protest (New York: Routledge, 2009), 7.
between “art, activism, politics, and performance.” Interestingly, though, in this work the preoccupation is not solely with how progressive performative political action is, but also how it is potentially regressive. In the introduction, the editors state, “The Bakhtinian carnival… can easily give way to a contained and predictable parade fascinated by its own creativity, when it is not concerned with generating site and context specific situations sustaining a continuous political engagement.”

Ludlam, for one, may have been more interested in his creative work and the fame that could arise from it than from any engagement with political or social change.

Therefore, I consider the radical potentials of the Ridiculous but also recognize how the movement may have been regressive. For a work to be considered radical, Kershaw argues that a work of art must “be deeply rooted in the conditions of the contemporary. So radical performance always participates in the most vital cultural, social and political tensions of its time.” On the one hand, the Ridiculous appears a clear product of its historical moment; on the other, its clear disavowal of engagement with politics and protest implies a subtle disregard for the conditions of its time. The Ridiculous, it seems, not only remixed elements of culture; it also turned how we understand “radical performance” on its head.

What was radical—or even activist—about the Ridiculous was entirely embedded in the creators’ aesthetic choices. At the heart of these, there is a prevailing thread: that of a queer sensibility or aesthetic. As Fabio Cleto understands it, “‘queer’ enacts confrontationist tactics, in which the subordinate, the deviant, voids the categories of the

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13 Ibid., 13.
14 Kershaw, Radical in Performance, 7.
dominant, replacing them with their opposites (multiplicity, diversity, instability, change and surface), and in doing so it demystifies them as self-ratifying devices, as cultural constructs deployed to subordinate otherness,” building this discussion on Judith Butler’s concept of “performativity.” Queer, then, is an activist stance, one which undoes hierarchies through performed acts. In addition, queer is preoccupied with moving away from simple categorizations or easily defined identities. Something that is labeled queer is designed directly and explicitly to get away from using stable categories of gender and sexuality.

Queer is, however, a multi-valent and complex term; the above explanation is only one way in which to understand its meaning. Indeed, queer has so many possible definitions and varied applications that, to some degree, in the contemporary moment, it has been rendered seemingly meaningless. As Jean Bobby Noble suggests in Sons of the Movement, “it seems that ‘queer’ is beginning to become an unusable term; it has the potential to be centripetal or stabilizing the space it marks, or centrifugal, that is destabilizing the spaces it flags (as in to pervert, torsion, make strange). …It seems to me [Noble] it’s time to call for another—dare I say post-queer—refinement of our languagings.” Noble believes that it is time to push beyond the theorizations of preceding decades. According to Noble, it is now time to find terminology applicable to our complex understanding of gender and sexuality in the contemporary moment.

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In order to do this important linguistic work, Noble looks to examples from culture itself. For Noble, the definitions of concepts such as “masculinity,” “femininity,” and “gender” can “be found in cultural artifacts: texts, performances, and/or images that explore endangered and trans subjects.”¹⁷ I suggest that one way to understand the term queer is also through its manifestation in performance. In the case of the Ridiculous, “queer” can be seen in action on stage and, because of this, an historical trajectory can be drawn from these performances to the gender and queer theories of the 1990s on which I sometimes rely. Many Ridiculous performances seem to presuppose the concepts of gender construction that scholars explored in this later period.

Beyond gender representations, however, this is work that is self-consciously preoccupied with the act of performance in all of its forms. This is reflected in Kenneth Bernard’s play The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico (1973), an important case study not only because it was presented under John Vaccaro’s direction at the Play-House of the Ridiculous but also because it is emblematic of the aesthetic which I am discussing. After a lengthy description of the scene at the play’s opening, which includes “fanfare,” “a seventeenth-century drawing room,” and “audience [sitting] in chairs on three sides, the first row left vacant for the gentlemen and ladies of the court,” Ma-Gico announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, this show begins and ends with a dance.”¹⁸ The actors are aware that they are playing roles and are assuming the personas required by the play. At the same time, however, they can also drop these identities and join the audience. This

¹⁷ Noble, Sons of the Movement, 10.
performance is entirely preoccupied with its own status as a performance; it is metatheatrical, as much about the performance itself as it is about the actions of the play.

This interest in performance, not solely in gender performance, is at the heart of what makes the Ridiculous aesthetic “queer.” As Jill Dolan states in “Building a Theatrical Vernacular: Responsibility, Community, Ambivalence, and Queer Theatre,” “To be queer is not who you are, it’s what you do, it’s your relation to dominant power, and your relation to marginality, as a place of empowerment.” Queer is preoccupied with one’s actions, not solely with one’s identity or essential qualities. In this way, queer is engaged with performance because performing is active; it is a way to engage with power structures and one’s position in society. Indeed, the Ridiculous artists were queering theatre through the types of anarchic, gender-bending, culture-blending performances that they created.

Based on this interpretation, then, one element of the Ridiculous style that allows it to be viewed as being queer is that it delights in the act of performance itself. As Stefan Brecht contends in *Queer Theatre*, Ridiculous plays are about viewing the “process” of performing, not a polished finished product. Brecht explains that you are “seeing an activity as such—a doing, perhaps a making—rather than the doing or making of something. We are not so much seeing a play as the making of a play.” The emphasis here is on the process of performing, not the product of a performance.

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Because of this intentionally “unpolished” quality, the body of work associated with the Ridiculous is often labeled “camp,” as these are plays in which the actors “ham it up” and low cultural material is presented alongside of or in place of high art. According to Cleto, calling this work “camp” implies something deeper about the plays. Cleto argues:

Camp is a mode of perception… that cannot in its enactment leave out an element of performance on the part of the… object, the decoding of which emphasise [sic] its failure in performance, nor on the part of the subject, whose perception is in itself an act of performance, with its necessary audience and its allusive, winking narcissism. Vice versa, camp as a ‘style’ of performance doesn’t exclude—quite the reverse: it presupposes—an element of perception, an encoding and decoding of the self and the world as stage, and of failure of intentions.²¹

The key point here is about failure: camp productions are meant to fail. The emphasis here is on the act of reception on the part of the viewer; he or she must recognize the failure not as something negative, but rather as being significant to the work’s overall meaning. Ridiculous plays always possess a slightly unfinished quality; at one point in Irma Vep, for example, it is clear that one actor is playing two roles, wearing elements of each costume on a distinct half of his body and jumping back and forth. There is no attempt at theatrical realism, which could be seen as a failure to convince the audience of the reality of the world presented on stage. Yet, the point of the play is not to deceive the audience into accepted the on-stage action as a window into the real world. Rather,

Ludlam’s play is all about performance: his actors playing on-stage for the delight of his audiences.

The interest in play, or what might be seen as an unfinished or amateur quality to the Ridiculous productions, can be linked with a contemporary understanding of queer via the concept of failure. In his recent book The Queer Art of Failure, Judith/Jack Halberstam shows how a “silly archive” can be used to discuss academic topics (like using the children’s film Madagascar to discuss the concept of queer). In addition, Halberstam sees failure not as a negative but rather as something potentially progressive. Halberstam suggests, "The history of alternative political formations is important because it contests social relations as given and allows us to access traditions of political action that, while not necessarily successful in the sense of becoming dominant, do offer models of contestation, rupture, and discontinuity for the political present."22 I explore how these performances may have been able to serve as this type of break with the mainstream even if they did not enact specific political change.

Therefore, one potentially progressive aspect of the Ridiculous aesthetic is an interest in the act of performing, as opposed to the creation of finished works of art. In order to solidify this understanding of a performative approach to the self as being not only queer, but also suggestive of a potential radical valence, it is useful to turn to José Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity. Muñoz is interested in the way in which the queer is engaged in the practice of imagining “another world,” as Begüm Özden Firat and Aylin Kuryel say in Cultural Activism is “one of the most

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defining characteristics of what we call contemporary activist practices.”

In his book, Muñoz suggests hope as being part and parcel of the queer aesthetic. He professes that his use of the queer lens “challenges [readers] to feel hope and to feel utopia.”

He sees queer as a site for individuals not only to explore the possibility of how to create a better future but also to feel that things can and will improve in a later moment. Kershaw, like Muñoz, is also interested in the concept of hope, suggesting that certain so-called radical performances are “vitally inflected by a pathology of hope.” Location is key here; as Dolan suggests in her Introduction to The Queerest Art, “queerness becomes a place to which people can travel, to find pleasure, and knowledge, and maybe (or maybe not) power.”

The map of the Ridiculous that I create in this dissertation is ultimately going to plot to what degree the Ridiculous spaces themselves were physical manifestations of the “place that queerness becomes.” In this way, I will follow the “contours of this avant-garde” and its “contentious edges” as the movement spread to various locations in the downtown theatre scene. The point here is to map these spaces in terms of their radical, queer aesthetics and perspective (or lack thereof).

In this dissertation, I draw comparisons between the aesthetic choices made by the select artists and companies being studied. I will do this in order to isolate how Ridiculous artists can be viewed together as members of an artistic movement. I am

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23 Firat and Kuryel, eds, Cultural Activism, 14.
24 Ibid., 18.
25 Kershaw, Radical in Performance, 12.
interested in the three “branches” of the Ridiculous that Ludlam mentions in an interview with Gautum Dasgupta from *Performing Arts Journal* to help limit this study. Ludlam suggests that, “Of the three branches that broke up—John [Vaccaro], Ronnie [Tavel], and I—John went and created a director’s theatre, Ronnie a playwright’s theatre in that he continues to write, and we created an actor’s theatre, an acting troupe.” However, I am extending the analysis to include other artists who also possess a similar aesthetic to the one used by the three strands that Ludlam mentioned.

Despite limiting the number of artists included for the sake of this dissertation, I plan to emphasize that the Ridiculous was not just a product of the imaginations of Ludlam or Tavel, but rather a coherent trend in theatrical production. I am marking the beginning of this movement as occurring in the late-1960s with the founding of the Play-House of the Ridiculous and continuing through Everett Quinton’s chairmanship of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which came to an end in the 1990s. Although there are later works which may fit the model I am using here, I will only look at later derivatives of the Ridiculous aesthetic, such as the works of Charles Busch, Kiki and Herb, and Tony Kushner, in terms of the question of legacy in the conclusion.

This dissertation will fill a gap in scholarship on this period of artistic production. Previous works focus almost exclusively on the works of Charles Ludlam. David Kaufman’s biography, *Ridiculous! The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam* extensively outlines Ludlam’s contributions. In addition, Ludlam’s theoretical papers have been collected into the work *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly*, and Rick Roemer has recently published a volume that analyzes Ludlam’s playwriting and

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influences. However, very little mention is made in these works of Ludlam’s connection with the surrounding artists of his era, except to mention that he broke away from the Play-House of the Ridiculous. Rather than approaching Ludlam as a discreet artist, this dissertation will engage the productions of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in order to highlight how they are interconnected with surrounding artistic production in terms of space and aesthetic. I study Ludlam and his contributions in order to ascertain how his work is relevant to the development of this Ridiculous aesthetic, not in order to emphasize how he was the sole or foremost practitioner of that style.

The other companies and artists have received very little critical attention. Vaccaro and the Play-House of the Ridiculous are mentioned in Brecht’s *Queer Theatre* as well as in Bottoms’s *Playing Underground*. In both cases, the company is principally dealt with historically, though both works gesture toward analyzing the aesthetic choices being made. This dissertation will explore Vaccaro, Tavel, Bernard, and others associated with the Play-House for their use of this radical, queer performance aesthetic, drawing links between their artistic output and that of artists surrounding them.

In order to flesh out this original discussion of Ridiculous Theatre, I did a great deal of primary research. My methodology included both visits to archives and interviews. Using these firsthand accounts of the work gave me a clearer sense of this mode of artistic production that I am rarely able to see performed live. These interviews, particularly one with Ludlam’s partner and current Ridiculous practitioner Everett Quinton, shed important light on what the Ridiculous meant in its own era and how its influence is still felt within our own. My research, then, goes beyond merely interpreting Ridiculous plays; I attempted to bring this work to life as often as possible, not only by
speaking with experts but also by seeing productions, such as Quinton’s *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, and museum exhibitions, like *Rituals of Rented Island* at New York City’s Whitney Museum. I refused to accept the Ridiculous as something deceased and try to continue its lifespan in the pages of this dissertation.

Therefore, I begin this dissertation with the height of Ridiculous production and the one icon most likely remembered (when the Ridiculous is remembered at all): Charles Ludlam. I do not wish to privilege Ludlam above all of his contemporaries, yet I see in his work an apotheosis of all of the artistic elements I have come to associate with Theatre of the Ridiculous. His works remix aspects of high and low culture, they invoke the idea of community through shared cultural reverence for the popular, and they reconfigure the representation of gender in new and innovative ways. It only makes sense to understand Ludlam’s Ridiculous first, as his work sheds light on all of its contemporaries. I take a broad approach to Ludlam’s work, using both his published works and his unpublished papers to ground my understanding of Ludlam’s theorizations about and practices of Ridiculous Theatre.

Although Ludlam began his playwriting career creating plays in the anarchic, freeform style employed by the other playwrights included in this study, by the time of his death in 1987, Ludlam was shaping fairly traditional works of theatrical farce, albeit with the inclusion of gender play. With the production of his late plays, the Ridiculous expanded in terms of mainstream and commercial success at the same time as the style of “citation” changed. Ludlam’s works drew from, and were often based on, works from the dramatic canon, as opposed to the detritus of culture. This space, a very traditional “theatre” amongst the varied sorts of locations in which Ridiculous Theatre occurred,
housed the closest to canonical dramatic works. Therefore, I expose a mirroring between the style of reference employed and the physical space in which the performance occurred. Warhol suggests that “there were two types of people doing counterculture-type things—the ones who wanted to be commercial and successful and move right up into the mainstream of society with their stuff, and the ones who wanted to stay where they were, outside society.”

I believe that Ludlam, unlike many of his contemporaries, belongs firmly in the former category; his residence in a traditional theatre and his move toward creating more tightly plotted dramatic works confirms this.

In the subsequent two chapters, in order to undo the favoring of Ludlam, a common problem with studies that do cover the Ridiculous, I map the complicated threads that eventually weave together to create Ridiculous Theatre as Ludlam practiced it. This trajectory can be said to begin with performance artist and filmmaker Jack Smith, yet his aesthetic was so deeply influenced by his reverence for 1940s movie star Maria Montez, it is virtually impossible to discuss one without the other. Chapter Two takes Smith and his Montez-worship as its focus, using this to discuss the complex threads of influence that were present in Ridiculous Theatre.

I return to the notion of haunting—or, to use Marvin Carlson’s more useful theoretical term, “ghosting”—as a way to discuss both Smith’s and Montez’s influence on the Ridiculous aesthetic. According to Carlson, “There clearly seems to be something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it a particularly attractive repository for

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the storage and mechanism for the continued recirculation of cultural memory.”

Through the apparatuses of theatrical performance, coupled with the preservation possibilities of recorded media, Smith was able to both evoke and invoke the spirits of the popular culture icons of his youth. Throughout Ridiculous sites, there are recurrent cultural motifs: Hollywood cinema, television advertisements, and other pop culture material. The Ridiculous allows the presences, or ghosts, of oft-overlooked cultural icons a prominent place on its stages.

In particular, this admiration—bordering on obsession—for a film star generates the kind of popular culture worship that brought together a “community” around the Ridiculous Theatre. To balance, I interrogate the negative side of this “community-building”: the competition, usurpation of techniques, and ultimate jealousies that it birthed. I examine how this “ghosting” problematizes Smith’s position insofar as he was also ghosted by his once-friend, sometime-rival Andy Warhol, much of whose own iconic Pop Art film style was influenced by Smith, though Warhol gave him little of the credit.

Discussions of the Ridiculous are almost inextricable from discussions of Warhol’s Pop Art, so building this bridge with Warhol also introduces the subject for my third chapter: John Vaccaro’s Play-House of the Ridiculous, the site at which both Ludlam and the term Ridiculous would get their theatrical starts (and which had ties to Warhol as well). Here, I continue the discussion of pop culture worship, but I frame it as a discussion of dramaturgy as opposed to performance, looking at the ways in which key Play-House plays “remixed” references to high culture and low culture in the same play.

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I build this discussion on contemporary theories of remix, such as those proposed by Edward Navas and Lawrence Lessig. I consider the valence of this cultural remixing: how in undoing cultural hierarchies the Ridiculous took a radical stance toward the cultural status quo of their time period. Based on this theoretical framework, although not explicitly political, Ridiculous remix suggests that these artists were interested in at least breaking with, if not upsetting, the norms of the larger American culture in which their Downtown Scene was situated.

Rather than reiterating the history of this space, as Bottoms does in *Playing Underground*, this chapter will contextualize the aesthetic in which the artists involved (which at one point included Vaccaro, Tavel, and Ludlam, simultaneously) chose to work.\(^{31}\) In particular, I am interested in evaluating how the unique middle class upbringings of these individuals—the particular mix of the low cultural elements of twentieth century American lifestyle alongside university educations—contributed to the development of this aesthetic. In this way, I plan to argue that the Ridiculous is an example of a blending of forms. As Ludlam suggests, “[The Ridiculous] takes what is considered worthless and transforms it into high art.”\(^{32}\) I am interested in the potential radical valences of this, and will study this blending of forms in terms of David Savran’s analysis of middlebrow culture in *A Queer Sort of Materialism* reading that text against theories of kitsch and camp.

This chapter will look at how this ostensibly “apolitical” space becomes politicized. I use the blending of forms inherent to the Ridiculous style to frame how this

\(^{31}\) Plays such as Tavel’s *The Life of Lady Godiva* and Ludlam’s *Big Hotel* and *Conquest of the Universe or When Queens Collide* will be key texts analyzed here.

\(^{32}\) Ludlam and Dasgupta, “Interview,” 69.
work fits the definition of “radical” being used in this thesis. Ridiculous work is positioned between being a serious art and a piece of disposable low culture. Kershaw is preoccupied with sites “on the cusp,” in his case between modernity and postmodernity. The lack of binaries suggests a difficulty of categorization, which, in the framework of this dissertation, can be linked with a radical stance. There are also, of course, regressive aspects to this—an interest in the ephemera of mainstream culture betrays a lack of interest in progressive social change.

“Remix” can also be applied to the nature of gender performance in the Ridiculous, as I find the Ridiculous construction of gendered identities on stage to be even more complex than simple cross-dressing. In my fourth chapter, I begin the discussion of Ridiculous legacy with performance artist Ethyl Eichelberger, who credited Ludlam as both influence and mentor but who would ultimately expand the concept of gender performance through his own productions. I look specifically at his solo works in which he played female icons, both famous and not so, in order to establish the perspective on gender performance in Ridiculous Theatre.

I argue that what is privileged in the Ridiculous is not the crossing of gender exclusively, but the performing of character above all else. In this right, any role could be seen as “drag,” as all performing throws into relief the unstable and performative nature of identity. I build on the discussion of the “remix” from the previous chapter by deeming this sort of gender performance “mash-up,” referencing the particular form of remix that involves the layering of media to create a unique original product. I reference gender and queer theory of the 1990s, such as the works of Judith Butler, to support my reading of these performative works. Of particular use is Butler’s discussion of drag
Gender Trouble, which is often used to interpret cross-dressed performance. Butler writes, “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.”

Although much has already been said about how drag subverts a binary gender system, I believe that Ridiculous drag performance, and later styles that build on its perception-altering aesthetic, embody this reality in a way cross-dressed performance on its own only implies.

In Ridiculous spaces, gender was something to be performed, but it need not follow any particular rules of what shape that performance was meant to take. The less traditional space—such as these clubs or Smith’s loft—the less “realistic” these identities needed to be. This artistic work presupposes the style of performance contemporarily distinguished as “genderfuck” in which gender representations are so complex, there is no easy way to categorize any performer or character into a simple gender, or even cross-gendered, category. As June Reich suggests:

Genderfuck could be said to be the effect of unstable signifying practices in a libidinal economy of multiple sexualities. The production of a recognizable genderfuck paradigm, effected by camp ‘realness,’ alters the contextual process of signification by foregrounding the gap between sex and gender and producing different models of interpretation through different writing/reading practices.

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Genderfuck, as a mimetic, subversive performance, simultaneously traverses the phallic economy and exceeds it.\textsuperscript{34}

Genderfuck is a way beyond binaries as well as a disavowal of any essential links between sex, gender, and sexuality. Eichelberger’s performances are distinctly marked by the “unstable signifiers” that Reich singles out as necessary for the destabilizing of genderfuck to occur. Eichelberger’s performances, like “drag” more generally throughout the Ridiculous scene, bridges the “identity politics” constructions of queer from the 1990s with more contemporary understandings of the meanings and valences of performing gender(s).

Finally, in my fifth chapter, I take up legacy in its own right, trying to ground what happens to the Ridiculous when its unique historical moment comes to an end. By looking at its direct inheritors, such as Charles Busch and Tony Kushner, as well as those whose work shares aesthetic similarities with the Ridiculous, like the performances of Kiki and Herb and \textit{Hedwig and the Angry Inch}, I am able to analyze what exactly happens to Ridiculous Theatre when it moves uptown to Broadway, HBO, and beyond. According to Pop Performance scholar Uzi Parnes, “I think all of these people thought of themselves as avant-garde.”\textsuperscript{35} Although his comment only extends to those he wrote about, which includes Smith and Eichelberger but not Ludlam, there is a sense in which the entire Ridiculous scene was an avant-garde one, in that these artists created work both ahead of its time and at odds with mainstream, as well as countercultural, standards of its own era. And yet, how we now understand Ridiculous Theatre is often through its


\textsuperscript{35} Uzi Parnes, interview with the author, October 8, 2013.
practitioners’ mainstream descendants, such as Busch and Kushner, who may have began
their work via a reverence for Ludlam and his contemporaries, but who ultimately
brought those productions further uptown than any of the original Ridiculous
practitioners ever had.

Why have I chosen to cover these artists and not others? That, it seems, is another
question that haunts my work on the Ridiculous. Jack Smith never called himself
“Ridiculous” and tried quite hard to distance himself from the farce works of someone
like Ludlam. His work is more often discussed in the context of film art\textsuperscript{36} or alongside
other equally as esoteric artists, like Richard Foreman, as it is lumped in with the artists
discussed here. Ludlam, on the other hand, might more easily be compared to the great
farceurs of history, like Molière, than to Smith or his inheritors, such as Foreman.

And yet, for me, the concept of community becomes key in defining the
Ridiculous geography. It is noteworthy that these artists worked near to one another—
though there were a plethora of others making art in the Downtown Scene in this
period—and that these particular artists’ works shared certain aesthetic commonalities.
But the most significant aspect to how the boundary lines were drawn around my
Ridiculous landscape was to what degree these artists built directly and specifically on
the works of each other. The works of Ludlam are a kind of Ridiculous apogee, yet he
specifically called out Jack Smith as his artistic forefather. Ethyl Eichelberger, who also
might be more readily discussed in the context of the downtown club or drag scene, cited
Ludlam as a mentor on his theatrical development. Smith was connected to Warhol and

\textsuperscript{36} The recent \textit{Rituals of Rented Island} exhibit at New York’s Whitney Museum made a
strong case for studying Smith in the context of the experimental scene of the 1970s,
putting his work into conversation with such diverse artists as Robert Wilson, Laurie
Anderson, and Mike Kelley.
the Factory and, I believe, without Warhol’s productive Pop Art scene, the Play-House would never have been born: John Vaccaro and Ronald Tavel came together in order to work on productions of Warhol’s scenarios. Even Peggy Shaw, of Split Britches fame, has cited Ludlam as an influence on her introduction to downtown theatre. These strange topographical lines that connect these artists together are what I try to trace through this dissertation.

Clearly, understanding what is meant by “ridiculous” goes back to the earliest days of theatre criticism; Aristotle’s quotation proves this. It also suggests that Ridiculous Theatre is not an anomaly; understanding its meaning is critical to comprehending the theatre more broadly. The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a roadmap to uncovering the Theatre of the Ridiculous, to return this movement back into the discussions of American theatre, so that other aspects, artists, and sites associated with it may continue to be unearthed and brought to light. I hope that by mapping out this Ridiculous geography, I am able to shed some important light on how that topography was formed. Many people think they know what Theatre of the Ridiculous is; *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is a commonly performed play and Ludlam is the Ridiculous’s most famous playwright. Yet, I am offering a perspective on this work that has heretofore not been provided: a bird’s eye view of the entire movement, one that includes tools for theorizing about these important works. It is not enough to know where the Ridiculous was and when it happened, although this is key information when trying to unpack what the Ridiculous was. In addition to setting, one must also understand the aesthetic language of the Ridiculous, something that, with the exception of mentions of drag and discussions of cultural references, has not been fleshed out in full
before. This dissertation is the first comprehensive critical study of the Theatre of the Ridiculous. A work such as this is long overdue, not only for studies of queer theatre but for discussions of American theatre and the development of comedy more generally. The Ridiculous deserves an honored place in the theatrical canon; this dissertation does the important work of beginning the process of giving the Ridiculous its rightful place.
Chapter One

“A Ridiculous Triple Threat”: Charles Ludlam and the Making of a Ridiculous Aesthetic

What is Theatre of the Ridiculous? In a 1979 article for Omega One, Robert Chesley suggests, “The Ridiculous Theatrical Company is not like other theater. It has qualities all its own, which appeal not at all to some people and which others find immensely appealing.”¹ Like many so-called definitions of the Ridiculous, this statement evades answering the question, suggesting that the Ridiculous is something unquantifiable that often operates as an acquired taste. Yet, Ridiculous practitioner and expert Everett Quinton would argue, “It is among the most important times in American theatre. It has shaped what the theatre is today….The Ridiculous does want to change the status quo.”²

Even Charles Ludlam, the great Ridiculous playwright, avoided answering this query directly. In place of a clear explanation, Ludlam once quipped, “The Ridiculous is a convenient name. Each time you do a play, it expands the definition of Ridiculous.”³ Obviously, such a comment does not provide much to go on in terms of what the Ridiculous, as a title for a style of performance, might mean. What it does prove is that pretty much anything—any topic, any punch line, any actor playing any role—might be fair game in this mode of performance.

² Everett Quinton, interview with the author, February 27, 2014, via telephone 2–3 p.m.
Yet, in his own personal notes, Ludlam created an outline on the subject of Ridiculous Theatre, entitled “Essaying Ridiculous Theater: It helps to be simple-minded.” Here he suggests that the Ridiculous finds its ancestry in sources as diverse as works by Alfred Jarry and Antonin Artaud; P.T. Barnum’s aesthetic of “putting on a show” and his “attitude of giving the audience an eyefull”; and “silent films” due to their “super-expressive acting technique.” He also saw the Ridiculous’s “Anti-Ancestry” as being directly tied up with reacting against the Theatre of the Absurd. Ludlam sees Ridiculous Theatre as “Antidote to the theater of the Absurd, beyond the circular construction of morbid existentialism.” Ludlam goes on to explain, “This non-discrimination state of innocence which I call simple-mindedness which is at the heart of the creative act is indistinguishable from idiocy or insanity hence the name Ridiculous Theater.”

Ludlam saw Theatre of the Ridiculous in conversation with a great lineage of both popular and experimental performance. Although this is not quite a workable definition, these notes at least give a context for analyzing and discussing what Ridiculous Theatre is—and what it is not.

According to Quinton, “I didn’t think Charles wanted to change the world. I think he wanted to change the theatre.” Therefore, like many of his historical predecessors in the avant-garde, Ludlam did, in fact, write a manifesto for Theatre of the Ridiculous. To what degree we can—or, indeed, we should—take this document seriously remains to be seen. In this supposedly defining statement, if the manifesto is meant to be taken at face value, Ludlam writes as his seventh axiom: “The theatre is a humble materialist

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4 Charles Ludlam, personal notes, found in the Charles Ludlam Papers in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.256, folder #5.
5 Quinton, interview, February 27, 2014.
enterprise which seeks to produce riches of the imagination, not the other way around. The theatre is an event and not an object. Theatre workers need not blush and conceal their desperate struggle to pay the landlords their rents. Theatre without the stink of art.”

Ludlam saw theatre as a way to make a living while still being a place for creation. He valued the commercial entertainment aspect over an aestheticist view of the form. This quotation, lifted from the only manifesto to be written about Theatre of the Ridiculous, reflects Charles Ludlam’s unique take on writing theatre. On the other hand, this document could be seen as nothing more than another ridiculous mockery, ridiculing both the gesture of manifesto writing and the form in which Ludlam found himself working.

To some extent, this pioneer of Ridiculous Theatre was merely an inheritor of the form; when he broke from John Vaccaro’s Play-House of the Ridiculous in 1967, he took the title “Ridiculous” with him as much out of spite as out of artistic intent. And yet, no single figure in the complicated history of this theatrical movement would come to be as associated with the form as Ludlam. His Ridiculous Theatrical Company created 29 works in the mode of Ridiculous Theatre, as much adhering to the above-mentioned manifesto as directly mocking it in their performances.

Thus Ludlam has often been seen as the quintessential source of Ridiculous Theatre, both in terms of theory and practice. His papers were collected after his death into a volume that still acts as a kind of theory of Ridiculous Theatre, entitled Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly, in honor of the manifesto he had written. In addition,

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6 Charles Ludlam, Scourge of Human Folly, 157. Incidentally, Jack Smith believed it was so-called “landlordism,” or the need to pay rent, that destroyed art.

7 Stephen J. Bottoms discusses this fissure in Playing Underground (University of Michigan Press, 2006). I further discuss this important moment in Ridiculous history in this dissertation’s third chapter.
when in search of a definition of the Ridiculous, scholars were likely to inquire how Ludlam would sum up the meaning of Ridiculous, in terms of performance. Notably, for an article on Theatre of the Ridiculous, written during the height of its popularity, in *Performing Arts Journal*, Gautum Dasgupta interviewed Ludlam, asking him to define the Ridiculous. I quote Ludlam’s response at length, as I believe his ideas shed important light on what we have come to associate with Ridiculous Theatre:

> It has to do with humor and unhinging the pretensions of serious art. It comes out of the dichotomy between academic and expressive art, and the idea of a theatre that re-values things. It takes what is considered worthless and transforms it into high art. The Ridiculous theatre was always a concept of high art that came out of an aesthetic which was so advanced it really couldn’t be appreciated. It draws its authority from popular art, an art that doesn’t need any justification beyond its power to provide pleasure. Sympathetic response is part of its audience. Basically for me, and for twentieth-century art, it’s always been a problem of uncovering sources; it proceeds by discoveries….It’s really an exercise to try to go beyond limitations and taste, which is a very aural, subjective and not a very profound concept for art. And to admit the world in a way that hasn’t been precensored….Ridiculous theatre is in color; it’s hedonistic. Different artists define it their own way, but basically it’s alchemy, it’s the transformation of what is in low esteem into the highest form of expression.  

Here, Ludlam privileges the Ridiculous practice of taking elements from low culture and elevating them to the same status as that which is borrowed from high culture. He sees

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how his art form was born of the popular culture that surrounded his day-to-day life as an American and allowed the shared interest in this popular culture to serve as the backbone for his style of theatre. Ridiculous Theatre is always tied up with enjoyment and with pleasure in performance; it allows both its performers and its audiences to indulge in what they like and to see those things as being valuable culturally.

This quotation from Ludlam does wonders to illuminate how to understand Ridiculous Theatre. I agree with Ludlam’s description, which I think is applicable beyond just his own Ridiculous plays. He clearly understood how this drama was constructed and how an audience might make meaning from a Ridiculous play. In a sense, it may be impossible to understand the Ridiculous without first understanding Charles Ludlam and his contributions to the style. This may seem counterintuitive, as his theatre was not the site of the initial genesis of Ridiculous Theatre. Although it is not possible to claim that the style was born in Ludlam’s spaces, it can be said to have been perfected there. Ludlam was able not only to synthesize the various complex elements that I see as being key markers of Ridiculous performances into his plays, but was able to do it with panache, creating a sizable canon of plays that, by and large, I believe do stand the test of time.

Throughout Ludlam’s 29 plays, all three of the components that I deem critical to Ridiculous Theatre are present: the plays are heavily influenced by the popular culture, particularly Hollywood cinema, of the early to mid-twentieth century, to the point of being almost communal sites of worship for these popular icons; Ludlam engages in a practice I call “Ridiculous remix,” in which references to and quotations from high and low cultural artifacts are blended into a unique original; and gender is always
problematized through the presence of at least one cross-dressed performer, with an emphasis on all character portrayal as a kind of “putting on drag,” highlighting the performative nature of gender both on stage and, by extension, in life. In these ways, Ludlam is the apotheosis of Ridiculous Theatrical practice, for better or for worse. He is the artist most remembered and the one who made the greatest impact on the larger American theatrical scene.

Therefore, my “tour” of the Ridiculous Theatre begins with Charles Ludlam, for a time comfortably situated at One Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village. It was here, from the 1970s and on into the 1980s, that Ridiculous Theatre, as a practice of art-making, would come into its own. Ludlam became the master of the style that he inherited, borrowing and usurping from the other artists around him—as well as from all aspects of the larger cultural scene and educational background to which he had access—to build a unique style of both playwriting and performing. By bringing together all of the key elements seen elsewhere throughout the landscape of the Ridiculous, Ludlam was able to create both an artistically innovative, and an infinitely “sell-able,” style of dramatic production.

The Life & Times of Charles Ludlam

Charles Ludlam, like many of his Ridiculous contemporaries, came from middle-class backgrounds. Born April 12, 1943 in Floral Park, New York, Ludlam was raised on Long Island and went on to study dramatic literature at Hempstead, Long Island’s Hofstra University. A transcript of a piece intended for Life magazine notes, “It was reported that a teacher discouraged his acting in favor of writing and directing because of Charles’
effeminate mannerisms.” Ludlam, however, decided to defy his instructors, and moved to New York City in order to purse pursuing performing as a career. Henry Geldzaher, a wealthy and important figure in the American art scene, “in January or February of 1966, referred [director John] Vaccaro to a would-be New York stage actor by the name of Charles Ludlam.” This encounter would eventually lead to the birth of a Ridiculous scene in Downtown New York. Ludlam received his first on-stage role in Ronald Tavel’s *The Life of Lady Godiva* (1966), a campy take on the classic tale of a naked woman’s ride through town to save the citizens. Ludlam had the important part of Peeping Tom, and, supposedly, stole the show. In *Playing Underground*, Stephen J. Bottoms states, “Perhaps the most revelatory performance was that of Charles Ludlam’s Peeping Tom.” Indeed, once Ludlam joined this community of performers, he proved to be a force to be reckoned with in all of their productions.

However, Ludlam’s tenure with the Play-House of the Ridiculous would be short-lived. After producing Ludlam’s first play, *Big Hotel*, based loosely on the 1932 Hollywood film *Grand Hotel*, Vaccaro wanted to direct a second play of Ludlam’s, entitled *Conquest of the Universe*. This play, a take on Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine the Great*, would prove to be a key production, not for its great dramaturgy but for the backstage drama that ensued surrounding its production. This play would

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prove to be the last on which Vaccaro and Ludlam would collaborate. Of the split, Ludlam scholar Rick Roemer writes:

During rehearsals … the relationship between Ludlam and Vaccaro began deteriorating when Ludlam objected to Vaccaro’s artistic choices as director. Ludlam felt that Vaccaro was too tame and didn’t take enough risks. Vaccaro was reluctant to present homosexuality and nudity on stage for fear of being arrested. The arguments intensified until finally Vaccaro fired Ludlam from his own play.\footnote{Rick Roemer, \textit{Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company: Critical Analyses of 29 Plays} (New York: McFarland and Company, 2010), 37.}

Others, such as Bottoms, recall the split differently, with Ludlam storming out on Vaccaro in the midst of rehearsals, as opposed to being fired. Because of these seemingly irreconcilable artistic differences, the landscape of the Ridiculous would never again be the same. Ludlam quit Vaccaro’s playhouse, taking many members of the company with him. Although Vaccaro owned the rights to the title \textit{Conquest of the Universe}, he had no legal claim upon the play’s content. This meant that Ludlam could produce his own production simultaneously, under a different name, which he did, calling his production \textit{When Queens Collide}. Even at this extremely early point in Ridiculous history, Ludlam was already emerging as an important figure: for a brief time in 1967, two productions of Ludlam’s second play were being performed downtown at the same time.

What this break with Vaccaro solidified for Ludlam was his need for his own company. Therefore, he founded the Ridiculous Theatrical Company (unwilling to allow Vaccaro and Tavel to maintain ownership over this new theatrical term). With this company, whose members varied over time, though at various points included such
important performers as Black-Eyed Susan, Lola Pashalinski, John Brockmeyer, and later, Ethyl Eichelberger and Everett Quinton, Ludlam went on to write, direct, star in, and produce 29 original plays. His most famous, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, is still regularly performed in regional theatres, opening in the spring of 2014 at the Red Bull Theatre under Quinton’s direction. Ludlam has made a longer lasting impression on the American theatre scene than any of his Ridiculous contemporaries.

Ludlam was an important force in the downtown scene, but he also found himself on the cusp of breaking into mainstream entertainment by the mid-1980s. He had a large role in the film *The Big Easy* (1986), starring Dennis Quaid and Ellen Barkin; he directed for the Santa Fe Opera in 1985; and he even starred as a cross-dressed Hedda Gabler in 1984 for Chatham College, which was “presenting the play as part of the second season of the American Ibsen Theatre” in Pittsburgh, Penn. As the *Life* magazine article notes, “While the Ridiculous Theatrical Company remains the mainstay of Ludlam’s creative life, there are signs that the resident genius of Sheridan Square is moving out onto the larger stage.” Yet, Ludlam would never get his honored place amongst the great names in American theatre and entertainment. Right at this point, the height of his career both with his company and on his own, Ludlam was diagnosed with AIDS and would succumb to complications associated with it, particularly “Pneumocystis carinii, which was a frequent cause of death for people with AIDS during the first decade of the epidemic.” He passed away in May of 1987 at the age of 43.

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14 Unpublished *Life* magazine article, found in the Charles Ludlam Papers in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.277, folder #14.
The AIDS crisis cannot be dismissed as a cause for why the Ridiculous is so often forgotten or overlooked. Had Ludlam lived, one can only imagine how famous he might have become and how much mainstream attention this might have brought to his small West Village theatre company. Despite often being excised from histories of American drama (or mistaken for popular fiction writers), what Ludlam did was truly exceptional. He not only became a kind of contemporary American Molière, but his works also display a culmination of techniques used throughout the queer downtown scene until this point to create a unique and flexible theatrical style. The plays of Charles Ludlam embody all three key elements of Ridiculous Theatre: they are all deeply indebted to the popular culture of the twentieth century, notably in his first work, the pastiche drama *Big Hotel* (1966); they included a remixing of elements borrowed from all strata of culture, particularly prevalent in what I refer to as his “late-style” dramas, *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde* (1983), *How to Write a Play* (1984), and *The Artificial Jungle* (1987); and he consistently played with the norms of gender performance, always including at least one character played in drag. Nowhere is this practice of what I call “gender mashup” more pronounced than in his classic portrayal of *La Dame aux Camélias* or *Camille* (1973).

The Ridiculous, in my estimation, must be a product of the blending of practices of popular culture ghosting, reference remixing, and a queer approach to gender identity. This is because the radical qualities of the Ridiculous—that is, the way in which it speaks to and with its historical moment of artistic production—is embedded in these aspects. The ghosting has radical potential as it is signifying that the detritus of culture may not be so disposable after all; rather, the popular may be worthy of its own ritual worship. Ludlam’s *Big Hotel* displays this in its unrelenting assemblage of cultural icons; it allows
the theatre space to be one in which any and all cultural ghosts are allowed a moment of
distinction and importance. This ghosting also allows for practices of textual layering to
be employed as dramaturgical tools. These “remixed” plays undo hierarchies of cultural
power in provocative ways, showing that a reference to a television commercial is as
useful, if not more so, than a reference to a classical work. Gender performativity is a
key aspect of this remixing; the layering of gendered identities into a single character’s
construction suggests both the instability of gender as a signifier as well as a further
undoing of cultural and social norms.

By looking at this particular cross-section of Ludlam’s works, I establish that he
did incorporate all of the major elements of the Ridiculous into his work. In this way,
scholars are correct: Ludlam is a key figure in Ridiculous Theatre production. He not
only synthesized these elements but did so in a way that created plays that are still
readable—and potentially producible—today. In addition, by studying his plays, a
language for discussing the Ridiculous aesthetic emerges. The style of pastiche used in
works like Big Hotel can be seen as a kind of ghosting; I discuss this idea in this chapter’s
next section. I build on that idea of ghosting in the subsequent section, in which I discuss
how Ludlam’s late plays are remixed. Finally, in the third section of this essay I apply
the concept of “mashup” to the portrayal of gender in Ludlam’s work, particularly his
iconic Camille, as a way to discuss his unique take on cross-dressing.

**Ghosting of Popular Culture: Big Hotel**

Certainly, one of the first aspects of the Ridiculous that becomes evident upon
reading or seeing one of these plays is the seemingly never-ending use of quotations and
allusions. As Ludlam noted, there was room for nearly everything in the Ridiculous;
nothing was sacred and nothing was above mockery. To write a Ridiculous play, one could, and should, quote from anywhere and everywhere, building his or her play from whatever references he or she felt were generative.

Ludlam took this notion of quoting to the extreme, especially in his early works for the Play-House of the Ridiculous. For the first three years of his playwriting career, Ludlam’s plays were grand-scale pastiches, referencing and alluding to everything and anything from pop culture to 1940s starlets to off-color humor and word play. Ludlam’s notebooks (one spanning 1967–1970 and another 1969–1973) show an interest in the collage form even for recording personal thoughts. The first notebook covers everything from personal musing about relationships and marijuana to reviews of performances he has seen to reflections on his company’s practices. Some ideas are recorded as complete passages; others are more associative, recording single words or small diagrams to get a point across. Ludlam recorded a particular tarot reading, possibly a study for the 1969 play *The Grand Tarot*, for example, a play which is an apotheosis of pastiche playmaking. The play can be performed in any order; the tarot deck would be dealt before the performance and “the order in which they [the cards] fall determines the order in which the scenes will be played.” Although the structure of this play was later standardized, just this concept for play presentation suggests a deep commitment to collage as an organizing principle. In addition, the latter notebook in the Ludlam collection shows his quotation collecting in action; he variously quotes from many

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16 This notebook is held in the collection of Charles Ludlam Papers, in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.256, folder #2.
different sorts of sources, sometimes on the same topic, interspersing his own thoughts and bits of his own original dialogue throughout the notebook. Even the construction of Ludlam’s own diaries was a process of collaging.

Collage as an organizing principle for drama is not an easy one for spectators to make sense of. There is a tension in the structure of Ludlam’s early plays, one that pulls against the rules of traditional dramatic construction and even rubs against itself, full of structural and story-telling inconsistencies. Quinton sees these early plays as emblematic of “the ‘theatre of anger,’” a term he uses to define some of the Ridiculous works. He recognizes the confrontational quality of these sprawling, early scripts. No attempts are made at developing tightly or fluidly scripted drama over the course of these plays, nor is there any sort of attempt at dramatic consistency across events. In early Ridiculous theatre, form mirrors content—everything that can be included is included and everything that can be questioned and/or mocked is subject to such treatment. The best example of this early playwriting structure is Ludlam’s first play *Big Hotel.*

Ludlam did not structure this play as a story-driven, action-based drama. Rather, *Big Hotel* is constructed from a series of references to and from other works. In his review of a 1989 production, Frank Rich puts it best, stating, “As for the narrative, forget it.” This play, written for John Vaccaro’s Play-House of the Ridiculous, may be the

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18 Charles Ludlam’s notebook, found in the Charles Ludlam Papers, in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.157, folder #6.
19 Quinton, interview, February 27, 2014.
best example of Ridiculous composition-by-quotation format. Rather than writing a closely-knit plot, the play is a mélange of various references. Roemer recognizes that “Although Grand Hotel was the overall inspiration for Big Hotel, the direct references to the film are few. The obvious one is, of course, the hotel as a thoroughfare through which an odd assortment of people travel, bringing with them danger, murder, intrigue, and glamour.”

Big Hotel operates as a kind of parade of characters through this hotel. The audience could watch the play as a collage of references—some familiar and some more obscure. It is a celebration of classic films revered by the artists involved in the play; the play operates as a large-scale pastiche rather than as a traditional drama. No specific dramatic throughline ties the actions of the play together. Rather, characters appear almost at the will of the hotel—or the playwright—and engage in on-stage interactions.

The point of this play is less the story or the action than what Ludlam was getting at in creating such a grand, sweeping pastiche as this. Big Hotel contains an apologia on behalf of its playwright, right before the action in the hotel commences. Within this self-referential speech, Elwynn Chamberpot states, “Truth says, of old the art of making plays/Was to content the people; and their praise/Was to the poet money, wine, and bays./But in this age a sect of writers are,/That only for particular likings care,/And will taste nothing that is popular./With such we mingle neither brains nor breasts;/Our wishes, like to those make public feasts,/And not to please the cook’s taste but the guests.”

Ludlam, as playwright, speaking through an agent character (whom he did not play), is

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21 Roemer, Charles Ludlam, 85–86.
basically stating that his interest is to please his audience, which will be made up not of
the high-class critics of culture, but of the common people. Because of this, then, the
play that follows is filled with jokes, double entendres, and popular culture references
meant to suit his particular audience.

In this play, Ludlam is paying homage to the shared cultural interests of his
company of performers and their audiences. These are people who indulged in the
Saturday movie showings at their local cinemas, who would recognize the film icons and
tropes being employed during the production. *Big Hotel* is a kind of “memory play,”
tapping into the shared cultural database of film scenes that Ludlam and other movie
aficionados like him would have seen in their youths. In *The Haunted Stage*, Marvin
Carlson suggests that theatre “is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory
of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modification as the
memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.”\(^23\) All theatre, to some degree, is
ghosted by the culture that created it. Ludlam decided to shine a light on his shrine to
popular culture, using this play as a place to present many of the films and stars that he
had idolized throughout his life.

Yet, according to Roemer, “[*Big Hotel*] was originally just a notebook filled with
various lines, quotes, etc. that Ludlam carried around with him, never intending to create
a play out of them. It was [Play-House of the Ridiculous director John] Vaccaro,
however, who persuaded Ludlam to fashion them into a play.”\(^24\) Ludlam may have
wanted to keep his collection of quotations to himself, but Vaccaro clearly saw how

\(^{23}\) Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor,
\(^{24}\) Roemer, *Charles Ludlam*, 85.
presenting these references, celebrating them on stage, would make a work of drama relevant to their times. In his review, Rich sees the play as “an unofficial manifesto of the Ridiculous artistic creed [with its] collage of transvestite clowning and classical references.”

There are a number of plotlines—the main one focusing on Norma Desmond, played in drag by Ludlam, facing problems with both her career and her agent—that all include references to “many familiar names of American films of yesteryear—Norma Desmond, Trilby, Svengali, Lupe Valdez and Maria Montez.” To untangle the story of this play is less important than to recognize the large degree to which it indulged in the worship of twentieth-century Hollywood cinema.

If the Ridiculous is ghosted at all—and I believe that it is—then it is by Hollywood film more strongly than any other influence or source. In this early work, particular stage images are foregrounded, usually drawn from the cinema. When asked why he was so interested in including particular film icons in his plays, Ludlam stated:

It is a tool for understanding what we are doing, the kind of things we are doing. You see, even if you imitate another actor—unless you are an impressionist—even if you try to imitate him absolutely, what comes out will be original. You can’t do it. So I think learning from other actors is useful, especially when you use them as a reference for a completely different type of things. It is a question of collage them in a new way... Mae West never made a movie with Gene Kelly.

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27 Transcript of Unidentified Interview, page 10, included in the Charles Ludlam Papers in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.277, folder #19.
Ludlam’s dramaturgical style is committed to the notion that something new can be made by mixing varied references to already existing material. The reference to Maria Montez in *Big Hotel*, in particular, is key, as she was a force throughout the Ridiculous scene. Ronald Tavel, Jack Smith, Ethyl Eichelberger, and John Vaccaro all mentioned her as an influence on their work or an aspect of their aesthetic at some point in their discussions of their Ridiculous creations. Ludlam was no exception; in this play he created “the so-called ‘Cobra Cunt Ceremony,’ which referred to *Cobra Woman*, the Maria Montez cult classic.” The scene was designed in homage to Montez as a High Priestess—portrayed in *Big Hotel* by [drag performer] Mario Montez—who selected sacrificial subjects to be thrown down a volcano.”

This scene allowed for the involvement of lots of “performers” and “artists,” or, more precisely, anyone who happened to be around for a particular performance. This production, though considered uneven by Joseph LeSueur in his *Village Voice* review, did include “a wildly imaginative theatrical effect [that] makes the climactic, otherwise disappointing Babylonian sequence worth waiting for.” I assume that LeSueur is referring to the “Cobra Cunt Ceremony” that Kaufman described, as the stage directions for it call for: “MOFONGA [the Maria Montez role] dances wildly, seriously pointing to each member of the cast in turn. When selected, the actor screams, ‘No, I don’t want to

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28 One could also see resonances of Maria Montez’s *Cobra Woman* in the recent Red Bull Theatre production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, directed by Everett Quinton. The play’s second act takes place in Egypt and includes a seductive, albeit silly, dance by a supposedly ancient mummy. Quinton’s production styled the mummy and her dance moves in such a way that it felt reminiscent of the sacrifice sequence of Montez’s film.  
29 Kaufman, *Ridiculous!*, 82.  
30 Ibid.  
be a dishwasher,’ and is thrown into the flames of the Firepit Restaurant by perfumed slaves with oiled bodies. Finally, all are sacrificed, and the slaves too throw themselves into the flames.”

If done with any theatrical flare—and what Ridiculous play wasn’t—then this scene would not only be a spectacular on-stage effect but also a fairly realistic rendering, even if a parody, of the climax of Maria Montez’s famous film *Cobra Woman*.

In light of this evocation of screen goddesses and their films in his plays, Ludlam claims in *Scourge of Human Folly* that one of the motivations behind his style was to engage audiences in new ways. One method for this was creating a collage-style play like *Big Hotel*; the lines could be “put together in different ways every night to see how they could work.” In this way, the audience was forced to actively think their way through what they were seeing. The plot, to a spectator, would be unclear and even Ludlam admitted this: “We knew what the plot was, but I don’t know if the audience did.” It would be up to those in attendance to attempt to make meaning out of that which they saw, to impose narrative to vignette.

Ludlam, however, wanted to take his interaction with audiences even further, especially since he was creating a work of theatre that indulged their shared cultural past. This direct engagement with the audience was what made the worship of the cultural ghosts in the Ridiculous unique from the ghosting that happens throughout world drama. As Roemer describes, Ludlam would “pull people in off the street and shove them up on stage.”

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34 Ibid.
who is never quite passive, as the religious proceedings include all in attendance.

Ludlam states, “Our goal was that the audience would become part of the theatre, that the theatre would expand to encompass the world. It was almost a religious idea.” These early Ludlam plays were rituals as much as they were plays and what they honored was the cinema culture of the early- to mid-twentieth century with which these individuals had grown up.

Theme is not what is valued in *Big Hotel*; performance and spectacle are. The play is preoccupied with theatre and, because of this self-awareness, can be seen as metatheatric. The characters of this play are, to a large degree, recycled from elsewhere—whether from Goethe’s *Faust* or *Sunset Boulevard*. Because of this, they draw attention away from any sort of “reality” of this hotel and throw into relief the fact that this is a performance. As Carlson elucidates, “Like the recycling of narratives, the recycling of characters is based upon an assumption that the theatre audience is itself recycled, an assemblage of people who, like the ghostly king, are ‘appearing here again tonight’ and thus carrying in their collective memory the awareness that drives the theatre experience.” As the performers are aware that they are in a drama, the audience in turn is aware that what they are seeing is a fiction, one built from stories and characters of which they are aware from other stories and sources. Metatheatricality is a key component of Ridiculous theatre; all of the artists considered here were interested in breaking with Realism as a form of theatrical representation. In its place, they were interested in exploring performance as an artistic mode in and of itself, not as a representation of reality or the real.

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In his work, Ludlam was willing to use elements of popular culture, sampling and remixing them (and celebrating them) in order to make something original. Roemer suggests that “overall, this play has no meaning behind it and was not intended as political or social statement; it must be taken at face value.” Although I agree that this is not an explicitly political drama, what it is able to accomplish in its reverence for popular culture and its direct engagement with its community of spectators, could be seen as quite radical in dramatic production. This play “laid the groundwork for the other plays to come” insofar as it suggested that any and all popular culture references were sensible source material for a drama and that anyone and everyone in attendance for a performance has an active role to play. By using their plays to worship the icons of their particular cultural past—as products of the film-going middle class America of the mid-twentieth century—Ridiculous artists like Ludlam were able to give value to the popular, which was otherwise overlooked in the “high art” strata of culture. As Carlson notes, “The simultaneous attraction to and fear of the dead, the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance.” In these forgotten Ridiculous productions, the characters from twentieth-century film are transferred to the stage and receive their due worship. Although these icons would exist perpetually on film, these productions gave the Ridiculous artists a chance to embody these personalities and bring them physically to life on stage. Culture is not divided into “high” and “low” in these Ridiculous plays; everything is worthy both of being honored and of being mocked.

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38 Roemer, *Charles Ludlam*, 90.
Remixing in the Ridiculous: *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde, How to Write a Play, The Artificial Jungle*

Ludlam saw his Ridiculous form as “an adventure, an exploration of the irrational deliberately unfashionable.” As a playwright, Ludlam took on the task of celebrating elements of culture that had otherwise been derided or eschewed in the intellectual theatre. Indeed, throughout the duration of Ridiculous play-making, borrowing from all aspects of the cultural landscape was a key component of their dramaturgy. References to high art—like the *Faust* sequence at the start of *Big Hotel*—were consistently blended with “low” culture references, like Maria Montez’s *Cobra Woman*. *Big Hotel* was an early version of remixing, using pastiche as a type of dramaturgy. Many lines are derived from an outside source and can be traced back to that other material. By being blended together, all of these references create a unique original artistic product, such as in the concept behind musical and new media remixing.

This type of play making, what I call “Ridiculous remix,” would become a mainstay at the Play-House of the Ridiculous, where *Big Hotel* was first performed and where Charles Ludlam began his career. Ludlam, too, would continue to experiment with forms of adaptation, quotation, and pastiche in his plays for the Ridiculous Theatrical Company for the duration of his career. All of his plays have at least one major reference to another work and are sprinkled with allusions to other cultural elements. This practice can be understood as radical; not only did Ludlam allow elements of so-called low culture into his plays, he constructed works in which they were valued, even worshipped,

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40 Notebook of Charles Ludlam, found in the Charles Ludlam Papers, in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.257, folder #17.
alongside of, or in place of, more highly respected cultural products.

That being said, by the last decade of Ludlam’s career, he was creating much more strictly plotted farces than the plays in the sweeping collage style of *Big Hotel*. This “late style” (I consider it late both because it came at the end of Ludlam’s life and because it appears to be a culmination of the aspects of his earlier theatrical experiments) shows Ludlam moving toward a more farcical vein, using more “high brow” references, mixed with “low brow” allusions. By this time a style known as Ridiculous Theatre had begun to emerge; in a 1976 profile of Ludlam, the author notes “anarchic humor, non sequiturs, broad farce, good and bad jokes, bawdiness both verbal and visual, and breakneck pacing” as all being elements “that one generally associates with the Theater of the Ridiculous.”

By the 1980s, this format had been entirely synthesized into a coherent method for writing comedies. A play like *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde*, for example, is less a Ridiculous mockery of the Molière comedy *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, and more a contemporary adaptation of it.

This play, along with *How to Write a Play*, a briefly performed, though (in this author’s opinion) hilarious, work, as well as Ludlam’s final completed drama, *The Artificial Jungle*, exhibit a flowering of the form of dramaturgy that began with the pastiche dramas of the Play-House of the Ridiculous into a true method for creating play scripts. *How to Write a Play*, it seems, both mocks the idea of creating a Ridiculous Theatre play while exploring what might actually be the method for doing so. *The Artificial Jungle*, on the other hand, is an exemplar of what this method can create, a

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perfect blend of a literary classic—Thérèse Raquin—and a Hollywood film—Double Indemnity—into a unique and tightly plotted original play, punctuated here and there with references to other works. Not only, then, does this play serve as Ludlam’s final drama but it also suggests what Ridiculous Theatre might have become, as a movement, if it had been given a few more years to develop and catch on in the mainstream theatre.

These three plays expose the development of “Ridiculous remix” from the broad stroke pastiche-style of playwriting used in Big Hotel to the methodical plot structuring of The Artificial Jungle. In a sense, Ludlam’s dramaturgy builds on practices of “remediation,” as defined by J. David Bolter and Richard Grusin. In their book of that title, they argue, “The process of remediation makes us aware that all media are at one level a ‘play of signs’…. Media have the same claim to reality as more tangible cultural artifacts; photographs, films, and computer applications are as real as airplanes and buildings.” Indeed, for Ludlam, films in particular are the cornerstones for art-making; his plays all include some reference to Hollywood cinema within them. Yet Ludlam takes this interest in media a step further, remixing these elements into a unique, original product. I am applying the term “remix” here in the way in which it is used in musical and Internet studies. Robert K. Logan, in his section on “Remix Culture” in Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan, expands upon the Wikipedia definition of remix which “defines a remix as ‘an alternate mix of a song made using the techniques of audio editing…’” by adding “the contemporary practice of creating new

cultural artifacts by remixing prior cultural elements to create something new.”

Basically, a remix creates a unique artistic work from the works of others, like Ludlam building his play on the plot of a Hollywood film and filling it up with characters and lines borrowed from all over the cultural map, as he did in *Big Hotel*. In his later plays, Ludlam engages in a much more precise remixing practice; he uses one or two major works as the basis for the plot line, and then mixes that story with all sorts of other references. Unlike in *Big Hotel*, in a work like *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde*, he does not allow the story to meander. Rather, he focuses on the development of one major plot and maybe one or two subplots, as opposed to many individual character threads.

In light of this tighter dramaturgy, it may seem that the Ridiculous loses its radical edge. Yet, Quinton proposes, “My new theory is the Ridiculous is not self-conscious. It wants to comment on the world.” How better to contribute to that process of commenting than to do so on one’s own style of work? In *How to Write a Play*, Ludlam “remixes” the entire idea of the Ridiculous, putting it up for mockery as much as any of the content covered throughout the plays. In this work, the driving narrative is a man named Charles who needs to write a play and it is remixed with all of the crazy distractions that will ultimately serve as the source material for his drama. Ludlam was sophisticated enough of a playwright not only to remix elements of the surrounding culture but even to remix the little sliver of culture which he was in the process of creating.

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44 Quinton, interview, February 27, 2014.
Finally, Ludlam’s *The Artificial Jungle* seems most indicative of late style composition, as articulated by Joseph N. Straus in “Disability and ‘Late Style’ In Music,” at least insofar as late style is meant to link styles of artistic production with the creator’s own debilitating physical and/or mental state. Ludlam became very ill after the opening of the production of what would become his final full-length play; it is hard not to draw parallels between his condition due to AIDS and the nihilistic content of this play. Yet I believe his late style began to develop as early as the mid-1980s, with *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde*. Late style, for Ludlam, meant a moving away from the sweeping epic collage style of his early works toward a more tightly plotted, and more accessible, while still heavily metatheatrical, style of farce.

*Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde*

For Ludlam, remixing was a marker of his dramatic style from the beginning; there is no denying that *Big Hotel*, in addition to being ghosted by the cultural past to which it pays homage, is also constructed from borrowed ideas layered together to create something original. However, Ludlam did not stick to this sort of dramaturgy for long. As early as 1970, he began writing more tightly plotted works, beginning with *Bluebeard*. This play, as well as every subsequent play Ludlam wrote, still heavily relied on references to other works. Yet, these plays also focused around a central plot line, with specific characters whose actions drove the plot forward, as opposed to the coterie of characters found in Ludlam’s earliest works.

The shift in style toward a use of a tightly structured and developed plot would reach its apogee by 1983; in that year, Ludlam wrote a well-structured, straightforward, Ridiculous adaptation of Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* entitled *Le Bourgeois*
Avant-Garde. It is clear from the Ludlam archive at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection
that he took much care in crafting this play; there are numerous versions in the archive as
well as annotated script pages from Molière’s original.\textsuperscript{45} Being true to his source
material was obviously very important to Ludlam as he crafted this daring and hilarious
commentary on the artistic community of the era in which Ludlam and his Ridiculous
Theatrical Company were creating their work. In his feature on Ludlam for the \textit{New York
Times} in 1983, the same year that this play first opened, entitled “The Eccentric World of
Charles Ludlam,” Sam Shirakawa highlights how this play both pokes fun at the
contemporary art scene while still allowing Ludlam the space in which to innovate.
Shirakawa writes, “But while the play roundly sends up the strained but vapid
innovations of some of the SoHo gallery crowd, Mr. Ludlam himself contends that there
is not nearly enough innovation in contemporary theater.”\textsuperscript{46}

\textit{Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde} is a quintessential example of the Ridiculous style at
its most polished and one of Ludlam’s more acclaimed productions. Among the
accolades that Ludlam received, one is a citation from the \textit{Villager} for \textit{Le Bourgeois
Avant-Garde}, which reads, “A dazzling romp through Molière’s comedy which probably
had the master’s ghost dancing through the halls of the Comédie Française with delight at

\textsuperscript{45} In the Charles Ludlam Papers at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York
Public Library for the Performing Arts, there are numerous drafts of this script, both
typed and handwritten, as well as annotated pages from Molière’s original. These
materials are all filed under 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.268.
\textsuperscript{46} Sam Shirakawa, “The Eccentric World of Charles Ludlam,” \textit{New York Times}, July 3,
http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/docview/122160530/13F4D7BD2616B8
AF2FE/1?accountid=7287
this cutting satire of cultural pretension.”  Ludlam’s great success here is in being true to the spirit of the original, using the same sort of satirical edge that Molière used to mock the bourgeoisie to take on his own era’s pretentious community of experimental art aficionados. This play is metatheatric, filled with references to other works, and imbued with high-spirited celebration.

In this play, it is art and its creation, especially experimental forms, which are being mocked; in the opening sequence a Composer and a Choreographer split hairs over definitions of artistic movements. When the Composer asks, “You mean you are a Futurist?” the Choreographer replies, “No, the future was over by the early thirties.” The Composer then proclaims, “Well I am a Postpostmodernist.” The debate is a clever mockery of the categorization of art and artists and the sometimes seemingly arbitrary distinctions among artistic movements. Ludlam’s last note in a collection of documents associated with this play’s construction? A scrap of paper with one word on it: “Post Talent.” Ludlam clearly saw the ways in which innovation is also a clever disguise for a lack of actual artistic ability.

In addition to presenting cutting contemporary commentary, however, this play is also a faithful modernization of the Molière work. Instead of finding a middle-class man aspiring to the upper class, Ludlam’s Mr. Foufas wishes to be “avant-garde,” to be on the cutting edge of art and culture. To this end, he, too, wishes to better his position by

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49 Personal note of Charles Avant-Garde in the Charles Ludlam Papers in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.268, folder #1.
marrying off his daughter to someone of the class to which he aspires. As with the Molière play, with the help of a nosy servant and some hijinks, the truth is revealed and the young woman is reunited with her rightful love.

By bringing in references to so much of the experimental scene, most of which “is abstract,” Ludlam was able “to illustrate his opinion by showing that [avant-garde art] doesn’t really mean anything at all and is, more often than not, pure pretense.” For example, Mr. Foufas is asked to “deconstruct” a letter, basically to approach it as one would a Dadaist poem, in which the order of words is meaningless. Mr. Foufas ends up with “‘Beautiful—your—eyes—for—dying—am—of—I—fair—love—mistress,’” a mix of words rendered meaningless by their lack of meaningful order. Much of the avant-garde and its artistic “pieces” are exposed for what they are—nonsense—as are their critics, pompous know-it-alls who actually don’t know much of anything.

In addition to this mocking of the avant-garde (in a sense, a gesture of taking something considered “high art” and disparaging it as if it were low), Ludlam is also able to “blend in” other cultural references into his “Ridiculous remix.” Most of these, however, tend toward “high culture,” such as references to Peter Brook and his imaginary language Orghast or a reference to the “Black Mountain School,” a riff on John Cage’s educational institution, Black Mountain College. Although there are some off-color jokes, such as references to flatulence, the overall work is faithfully rendered as a jab at the experimental art scene told through the framework of the Molière farce.

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52 Ibid., 708.
This work is a classic example of Ridiculous remix, if not for the way that it blends high cultural and low cultural references but for the ways in which it mixes academic aims—exposing the silliness of the avant-garde and exploring how a seventeenth-century work might be relevant to the contemporary moment—with the usual sorts of joyful elements—word play, topical references, and slapstick—built into the Ridiculous Theatre as a form. For Frank Rich, in his *New York Times* review, “‘Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde’ bills itself as ‘a comedy after Molière,’ and that’s about the only line of the evening that’s not a joke.” Rich recognizes that this is a play for theatre insiders, while being willing to mock those for whom it is designed. Rich writes, “If you’re not up on the latest tides in theater and dance performance art, you may get lost. If you are in the know, you may be offended—which is, of course, the point.” Kaufman agrees that this play is principally designed to poke fun: “As with all of Ludlam’s work, this division of aesthetic goals embodies a conundrum: Serious intentions are leavened—if not disguised—by the overriding conceit of the Ridiculous, which begins with inversions, ends in paradox, and, in the process, mocks all that it surveys, including the Ridiculous itself.”

*How to Write a Play*

In *How to Write a Play* (1984), Ludlam is able to deconstruct (without losing meaning) his own process of play making, bringing to light the true “ridiculosity,” to borrow Roemer’s term, of Ridiculous play construction. Indeed, Ridiculous play

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54 Ibid.
construction is a unique form of writing. As was the case with *Big Hotel*, it can involve stringing together quotations and references, or, as in *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde*, it can implement techniques of adaptation, such as pastiche and parody. *How to Write a Play* presents a wholly different form of *Ridiculous* remix, one that takes on the task of remixing the *Ridiculous* itself. The premise of the play is simple: a character named Charles is under pressure to complete a play and is continuously distracted by crazy occurrences, such as a millionaire who has fallen in love with Charles in the guise of alter-ego Galas and wishes to express his devotion to the beautiful woman he saw in that play or a dancer wishing to show off her “bump and grind” skills as an audition for Charles’s company, that interrupt his process.

What is terrific about this play is not only the incredible amount of jokes that are able to be woven into the text, but the fact that many of the jokes poke fun at Ludlam, his style, and his plays, as opposed to anything from the surrounding culture. Charles begins by indulging his own tools of procrastination, perhaps a jab at his own actual playwriting procedure, and then interacts with Everett, meant to be Everett Quinton, Ludlam’s lover and collaborator for the last years of his life. When asked to choose a fabric, Charles picks one and is told by Everett: “Good. I’ll use the other.” The point of this distraction? Everett explains, “Because you have absolutely no taste. And if you like it, then the other one must be the right choice.” Ludlam is willing to mock himself in this play, his process, his style, and even his taste in costumes. Nothing in the *Ridiculous* is above mockery, not even the artists themselves.

\[56\] Galas was a drag role that Ludlam had recently performed. The play focused on an opera singer named Galas, who was loosely based on Maria Callas. \[57\] Ludlam, *How to Write a Play*, in *The Complete Plays*, 817.
The series of events that follow are entirely ridiculous. My personal favorite encounter involves a woman reunited with her husband for the first time in fifteen years, who, rather than berating him for leaving her, exclaims, “Fifteen years ago you went out to buy a bottle of horseradish for the gefilte fish and you never came back! I’ve been waiting, Ima. It’s been a long time to be without horseradish. Where is the horseradish, Ima?” What is the most important thing here? Not the marriage, but the condiment. In this vein, almost every moment is played for a punchline and the ensuing party of the cast of crazy characters is as “absolute” as “farce” can be, in light of the play’s subtitle, “An Absolute Farce.” Just as two tramps in Samuel Beckett’s classic *Waiting For Godot* repeatedly recall they are “waiting for Godot,” Charles consistently reminds those around him that he needs to write a play. Yet, this play is not focused on the action—it is not called “Writing a Play”—but, rather, on the instructions for completing such an activity. This work could almost be seen as a model, a manifesto in its own right, for how one might go about constructing a work of Ridiculous drama.

*How to Write a Play* is remembered as one of Ludlam’s “more solid and delightful farces,” though it was not much performed in his lifetime. As Kaufman narrates, “*How to Write a Play* never opened for review. Its three historical performances were attended predominantly by the company’s most die-hard fans.” In reviewing Everett Quinton’s 1993 revival of the piece for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich implicitly likens its plot to the early *Big Hotel*, describing “a steady parade of interlopers who insist on knocking on the exasperated hero’s door as he tries and fails to write his play…” in place of a forward-moving, narrative-driven plot. Rich finds the meaning in

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58 Ludlam, *How to Write a Play*, 827.
this strange assortment of characters and their associated gags; he writes, “‘How to Write a Play’ finds its greatest pleasure in celebrating the sheer artificiality of theater and the infinite ways its oldest and hoariest devices… can be revivified by fresh inspiration.”

The play is, of course, about the writing of plays, both a metatheatrical reflection on the form of theatre art but also a metafictional recreation of Ludlam’s actual writing process.

“Metatheatricality” as a practice and concept is key to understanding Ridiculous Theatre. According to Patricia Waugh, “Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact [sic] in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text.”

“Metafiction,” then, is creative written work that it is aware that it is made up, aware of its own status as a creative product. With this knowledge, the work is able to analyze the form in which it was created through its content. Ludlam employed this technique in his plays, working in a form that is usually described as “metatheatrical,” or called “metatheatre,” building on Lionel Abel’s seminal 1963 work of that title. For Waugh, “terms like... ‘metatheatre’ are a reminder of what has been, since the 1960s, a more general cultural interest in the problem of how human beings reflect, construct and mediate their experience of the

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Indeed, Ludlam’s plays expose a desire to use theatre not only to contemplate topics of interest to the playwright, but to theorize about the form of theatre and the process of making it as well. A play like *How to Write a Play* is as much preoccupied with understanding the form of Ridiculous Theatre as it is any other element within it.

This play might be difficult to revive now, as it is so embedded in both the culture of the Ridiculous (the references to plays like *Salammbô* and *Galas*, both written by Ludlam) and the personage of Ludlam himself (his relationship with Everett, for example, or the fact that his drag was never convincing). Still, the script explores the real possibilities of the Ridiculous by remixing the Ridiculous as a style. It shows that anything, even the form itself, can and should be turned on its head and laughed at.

Ludlam states as his first axiom: “If one is not a living mockery of one’s own ideals, one has set one’s ideals too low.” No play better uses remix to exemplify this than *How to Write a Play*. When Charles realizes “I’m completely dry. I’m burned out. It’s writer’s block. I haven’t got an idea in my head! There’ve just been too many distractions!” Everett reminds him, “Why don’t you just write about all the distractions and interruptions that happen to you when you’re trying to write a play?” “That’s a brilliant idea! I’ll do it,” cries Charles, because nothing is more Ridiculous than real life.

*The Artificial Jungle*

By the mid-1980s, as can be seen in both *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde* and *How to Write a Play*, Ludlam had moved toward a form of dramaturgy that was preoccupied with remixing, but in a strict climactic, narrative, linear structure. Building on that tradition, and becoming the culmination of it, as it would be Ludlam’s last complete play, 1987’s

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64 Ludlam, *How to Write a Play*, 843.
The Artificial Jungle is perhaps the most tightly plotted drama that Ludlam ever created, being true to both its sources and its overall nihilistic tone. Here the remix of sources is much clearer than perhaps anywhere else in Ludlam’s oeuvre; as Frank Rich notes in his New York Times review, “The Artificial Jungle’ is Mr. Ludlam’s omnibus reply to ‘Double Indemnity,’ ‘The Postman Always Rings Twice’ and ‘Little Shop of Horrors’—with a little of Zola’s Thérèse Raquin tossed in for added kicks in Act II.”

The elements borrowed from each are fairly clear: Chester Nurdiger owns a pet shop with his wife, Roxanne, who falls in love with ne’er-do-well Zachary Slade. The two plot to kill Chester, as the couple does in The Postman Always Rings Twice, in order to cash in a life insurance policy on him, as in Double Indemnity. They commit murder by suffocating Chester and throwing him to the piranhas, which operate much like the carnivorous plant of Little Shop of Horrors. When the second act begins, the two seem to have gotten away with their crime, until they are overheard by Chester’s mother, Mrs. Nurdiger, who is then rendered mute by the trauma she has just heard, as in Thérèse Raquin. Slade and Roxanne are overcome with the guilt of their crime and their romance is destroyed. By the end of the play, only Mrs. Nurdiger’s eyes remain alive on stage. As this plot summary makes clear, this is a tightly knit noir-style melodrama. Its climactic structure fixates on this small pool of characters, all clearly linked with one another by the action, and it does not meander on in time, place, or story.

Ridiculous remix, then, can be said to have evolved from the early pastiche plays—Big Hotel, we recall, was originally nothing more than a notebook full of

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http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/docview/111039075/13F4DB9CB362EC D0FEB/1?accountid=7287
Ludlam’s favorite film quotations—to being a seamless blend of other stories, whether
great literature or Hollywood cinema or classical drama, in order to create a unique
dramatic work. In addition, however, we find something in The Artificial Jungle
heretofore not seen in Ludlam’s plays: a nihilistic approach to life. This seems to
contradict Ludlam’s stated “Aim: To get beyond nihilism by revaluing combat.” Rather
than fighting his fate, Slade commits suicide, uttering words from Albert Camus’s The
Stranger, a classic work in the Absurdist vein:

I’m dying. And I look up at the stars, the thousand unseeing eyes that look back
on this little speck of dust we call the world, and I ask—What was my crime
compared to your indifference. I committed a senseless murder. But in its very
senselessness it is in harmony with the universe, which is itself senseless and
ultimately stupid. In an aeon or two, who will be left to accuse me? These lines show an acceptance of death, as well as the idea that what a person has done
during his or her lifetime ultimately carries no weight. In a few generations, no one will
remember what that person did or, most likely, even that such an individual ever existed
at all.

This particular “remixed” element contradicts Ludlam’s own description of his
work, insofar as it related to the Theatre of the Absurd that preceded it. Ludlam
explains, “The Absurdists got bogged down in their own nihilism. We represent a
positive nihilism, like the kind you find in Buddhism. Instead of negating anything we

66 Charles Ludlam, “Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly,” TDR 19, no. 4
(1975).
Row, 1989), 905.
68 Ronald Tavel claimed to have created the Ridiculous Theatre as a reaction to the
Theatre of the Absurd. See Chapter Three for more.
try to find its inherent value.” According to Ludlam’s Ridiculous, then, life may be meaningless, but this fact should be a source of enjoyment, a way to justify finding as much pleasure in life as possible. Ludlam found the Absurd presentation of the meaninglessness of the world to be lacking. In his critical and theoretical writings about his work, Ludlam points out, “Modern art up through Beckett is the reduction of form—the elimination of things. There’s no way to go beyond Beckett, because you can’t get any more minimal. You reduce and reduce until there’s nothing.... I’m moving in the other direction, to a maximal, more baroque vision.” Ludlam was looking to create a universe full—in fact, almost overflowing—with things: both physical and linguistic. He wanted a world where conflict mattered and actions had meaning and significance.

This breaking with earlier theoretical concerns could signal that this work is a “late-style” piece from Charles Ludlam. A work is usually designated as late style when it comes late in the timeline of an artist’s career and is noticeably different in style or structure from the artist’s earlier work. Late style is a concept often considered in music, in instances where a composer’s last works differ significantly in content or structure from his or her earlier creative work; this notion of late style seems applicable in the dramatic arts, specifically in Ludlam’s case. In “Disability and ‘Late Style’ in Music,” Joseph N. Straus argues “that in the end there may be nothing late about late style in the sense of chronological age, the approach of life’s end, or authorial or historical belatedness. Rather, late style may in some cases be more richly understood as disability

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69 Ludlam, Scourge, 32.
70 Ibid., 31–32.
style: a perspective composers may adopt at any age, often in response to a personal experience of disability.”\textsuperscript{71}

There are various elements which mark a piece of late style music. According to Straus, these include: “bodily features (fractured, fissured, compact, or immobilized) and certain mental and emotional states (introverted, detached, serene, irascible).”\textsuperscript{72} In short, the music is analyzed and described in ways similar to the manner in which human conditions are considered. Straus lays out an extensive list of structural elements that can make up a late style work. Ludlam uses a number of them in \textit{The Artificial Jungle}; the play is structurally “barer, simpler, more attenuated” than earlier works; it uses a “direct and intimate mode of communication”; the characters to some degree are “introspective”; the construction of dialogue is “simplified” from the nature of the collage plays; there is a “direct” quality to the way in which the play deals with its existential theme.\textsuperscript{73} The combination of these elements in a musical composition would mark it, in Straus’s understanding, as a late style piece. Therefore, if Straus’s methodology is used when reading a dramatic text, these same elements could be applied in order to categorize this play as a late work.

In Straus’s concept of late style, the changes in musical composition are meant to be reflections of an artist’s changing relationship to his or her sense of physical or mental ability because of some debilitating disorder. Straus explains how this reflection of personal concerns through the form of one’s artistic creation is rendered in musical composition. Straus relates:

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 8–11.
We might simply assume that late-style works may involve internal contradictions, so that inherent tensions among these different characteristics are themselves a marker of stylistic lateness.… The traits associated with late style are largely evocative of disabled or impaired bodies or minds and their failure to function in a normal way. Many of the characteristics of late style suggest nonnormative physical, mental, or emotional states, and even specific disorders.74

Straus is describing the ways in which the musical elements that make up late style compositions mirror the realities of certain ailments afflicting the composers, whether these disabilities are physical, mental, or emotional. By looking closely at Ludlam’s final dramatic work, there seem to be echoes of the AIDS crisis, as well as Ludlam’s fear of his own mortality, reflected in the thematic elements that the play highlights.

Obviously, this is different from the kind of late style that Straus is suggesting; there is not apparent awareness on Ludlam’s part of his ailment, though he may have had a fear of the disease. Thematically, though, The Artificial Jungle seems a departure from a sense of “positive nihilism” or a “baroque vision” that Ludlam stated to be his aims. The connection between the nihilistic feeling of this play and Ludlam’s rapid decline in health and eventual death cannot be dismissed. Unlike the composers of which Straus writes in his “Late Style” essay, Ludlam did not construct The Artificial Jungle while being overcome with illness or disability. He would not officially be diagnosed as HIV-positive until November 1986, and the play had already opened in September of that year.

As Kaufman recognizes, “Even though The Artificial Jungle was written and produced before Ludlam was diagnosed with AIDS, irony topples over irony when one recognizes

74 Straus, “Disability and ‘Late Style,’” 11–12.
just how much his last play appears to be addressing the status of his own health.”

Ludlam was not writing about being sick, or “disabled,” as the composers in Straus’s article may have been.

Unlike Aaron Copland, Straus’s object of study, who wrote a late style composition while entirely aware of his impending loss of memory due to the onset of Alzheimer’s, Ludlam did not write *The Artificial Jungle* as a response to his HIV-status. Kaufman reminds, “No one, including Ludlam, realized that he was already infected with the HIV virus, and that his condition would rapidly deteriorate over the course of the winter and the run of the play.” Ludlam may have reflected on themes and used structural elements that, retrospectively, seem to be musings on his physical decline, but he did not do so as a means to deal with AIDS, as he was not yet aware that he had the disease. However, there is the possibility that Ludlam could have suspected that he was sick or feared that he might get sick. The onset of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s would have made a preoccupation with mortality even more pronounced for Ludlam—people, especially those who were part of his extended downtown New York community, were dying. Although Ludlam was not sick when he wrote this play, AIDS had entered the cultural consciousness by this time, and certainly could have affected his selections of material. It is possible that Ludlam could have been remixing these fictional narratives with his experience of the world at this time, expressing his thoughts on what was happening through his choice of source material.

*The Artificial Jungle* is significantly different from Ludlam's earlier plays; its nihilistic tone sets it apart from other works that Ludlam wrote and suggests an

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75 Kaufman, *Ridiculous!*, 436.
76 Ibid., 431.
inadvertent late style on his part. Still, its use of Ridiculous remix is remarkable; it suggests that this “late style” had begun its development as early as the beginning of the decade and only flourished fully in his last work. In his final play, Ludlam shows where Ridiculous playwriting may have gone if he had lived longer: there may have been more tightly constructed farces built from the perfect blending of sources that vary in cultural cache in order to reflect directly on the temper of the times.

**Mashing Up Gender: *Camille***

Indeed, throughout the Ridiculous scene—and even the larger Downtown scene of which it was a part—plays were being constructed from mixing together references from other sources. The Ridiculous, however, added a key ingredient to this blending process; in addition to remixing cultural elements in their plays, they also included gendered identities that came across as being similarly remixed. Almost every Ridiculous performance included some form of cross-dressing. This “drag” performance was not merely men dressing as women or vice versa. It was a more complicated, and potentially radical, statement on the ways in which gender should be seen as innate. A character’s gender, in a Ridiculous play, is merely another aspect to be put on and performed and, in this way, throws into relief the idea that within all individuals there is the possibility for any and all gender characteristics.

To achieve this end, the playing against biological sex was often not a perfect transformation in a Ridiculous play. In an article entitled “Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company: A Way of Working in the Theatre,” Ronald Argelander argues:

> Staged transvestism or theatrical sexual role-switching has been treated in countless plays, films, and community “firehouse” reviews as a comic
reaffirmation of strict sexual role division. “Drag” is denigrated by showing how impossible it is for a man to successfully create the role of a woman (and vice versa) except for the purpose of derisive laughter. At the Theatre of the Ridiculous, the laughter is not derisive. They entertain the idea that strict biological/social sexual division may be a cruel joke that nature/society is playing on humanity. For them, and in their performances, pan-sexuality is a reality. In fact, Ridiculous performers regularly avoided trying to pretend they were the opposite gender. Instead, they practiced a form of gender play that I call “gender mashup” because, like the contemporary Internet form known as mashup, this mixing allows its sources to be layered, as opposed to blended, and even to be evident to the viewer.

Mashups are a unique form of created content. According to Brett O’Connor, “The word mashup can apply both to the world of music and the world of web programming.” Based on what O’Connor and others have discussed the style and practice of mashing up to be, I believe that this term can have wider artistic application, such that it can include theatrical practices like the one through which Ludlam and other Ridiculous artists created cross-dressed characters on stage. For O’Connor, “a musical mashup typically involves combining two or more different songs, often from very different musical genres, into one, resulting in an entirely different musical composition” and “a mashup in the computing world usually involves two or more web applications or

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78 Brett O’Connor, del.icio.us Mashups (Somerset, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007), xx.
parts of web applications combined to make something new." In both of these cases, as in remix, a new work is created by combining elements of other works. However, in the case of mashup, according to O’Connor, it is usually the mixing of two disparate elements that creates the final work, as opposed to a blend of a myriad of references, as in Ridiculous remix.

Gender mashup, then, is a construction built of two genders—usually male and female, though performance artists like Ethyl Eichelberger would complicate this mixture—in which a new character is created from the blending of the two. This differs from traditional cross-dressing, a marker of world performance for centuries, in that there is usually no attempt to the fool the audience into believing that the performer is the other gender; he or she is only playing at it for the duration of the performance. In an interview with Ridiculous Theatrical Company collaborator Lola Pashalinski, Ludlam responds to her question of “Why then insist on transsexual casting?” by saying, “Well, I believe that personality is an artifice and I think that role playing is the eternal message of the theater, it’s its most profound theme. For us I think it wasn’t so much that we took on wrong roles because of sexual identification but that we refused to take on any role, we wouldn’t be one or the other sex because we saw that it was artificial, because we didn’t make the clear conventional identification.” The Ridiculous artists made this abundantly clear; Ludlam’s performance in Camille, for example, involved him allowing his chest hair to show above the neckline of Marguerite’s fancy gowns.

79 O’Connor, del.icio.us Mashups, xx.
This sort of playing with gender was different from the drag performance that we associate with Ridiculous contemporaries at Andy Warhol’s Factory. Drag superstars Candy Darling and Jackie Curtis, for instance, not only worked in drag on stage; they lived in drag outside of the theatre. Ludlam found this practice problematic, though he enjoyed on-stage drag performing. Of Candy and Jackie, he writes:

You give a performance and come offstage, and you’ve got to get into yourself and rest, reconstruct your own true personality again, indulge it. Only then can you go back and play the role again. But once you start playing the fantasy twenty-four hours a day, you may have obliterated your personality on a more or less permanent basis. A mask can be a protection to preserve what’s inside, but in the case of Jackie and Candy—particularly of Candy—they were always being overly generous with others, giving so much they didn’t leave anything for themselves.81

For Ludlam, drag was a performance mode, a way to create a character for the duration of a play. Outside of the theatre, he wanted to return to whatever Charles Ludlam was and enjoy that, instead of continuing to play a part for the world.

Ludlam did regularly perform in drag; in Big Hotel, he played Norma Desmond, both as realistic film icon and as mockery of that type. Yet, in his second play, Conquest of the Universe, he would leave the drag performing to other players of the company and instead played the tyrannical leader. To call Ludlam simply a “drag performer” is a misrepresentation of his career; he performed male roles in the Ridiculous Theatrical Company productions more often than female ones. In fact, Quinton admits, “I’ve played

81 Ludlam, Scourge, 22.
Ludlam’s contribution to acting was not his ability to perform in drag; rather, it was his profound understanding of how to blend realistic Stanislavskian acting methods with techniques appropriate for playing farce. Quinton describes Ridiculous acting “as walking both sides of the fence in the acting style. Play the story with all the honesty you can muster and then you find ways to lob jokes in.”

The impact of a play like *Camille*, then, is in its ability to portray the story honestly and with emotion, while punctuating that with humorous bits.

What is striking in Ludlam’s choice of parts is not that he often cross-dressed; it is that more often than not, he took the best role for himself, whether that part was male or female. The way gender mashup operates for Ludlam is as much as an ego-stroke for the lead performer/creator as it is as a way for the artists to present a commentary about the performative nature of gender. Returning to the concept of “metatheatre,” Mary Ann Frese Witt sees metatheatricality operating in modern plays as a way to draw attention to the “performativity of gender,” to borrow from Judith Butler. Witt writes, “Rather than mimetically representing the ‘real’ world, metatheater calls into question accepted notions of that reality, stressing instead the world’s theatricality.... In both the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, characters in metatheatrical plays show an awareness of themselves as performers, their performance, as it were, betraying their performativity,” linking this discussion of theatre drawing attention to itself to Butler’s understanding of “gender... [as] a performance that is performative: the consciousness of gender as performance has the effect of revealing that the notion of it being either

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82 Quinton, interview, February 27, 2014.
83 Ibid.
essential or foundational is an illusion.” Ludlam’s performances not only draw attention to the machinations of performing, exposing theatre as a falsehood, but also highlight how this extends to gender, reinforcing the notion that gender is equally as false as any other traits of a performed role.

Because of his experience with Ridiculous remixing, according to Kaufman, playing Camille was a perfect fit for Ludlam; “Given all its tragic and campy excesses, the subject was a natural choice for Ludlam, who was becoming an expert at recycling what had long been considered culturally effete and turning it into something fresh and viable—or at least outrageous.” Indeed, what was most striking about this production was Ludlam’s portrayal of the title role. In his review for the New York Times, Mel Gussow notes, “This is no facile female impersonation, but a real performance. Ludlam never forgets his gender, and neither do we. … Unlike transvestite actors who play females as if to the manner born, Ludlam in drag remains a clown.” Ludlam built on the mixing of culture by adding to it the mixing of gender: “his chest hair, which announced itself prominently beneath the décolletage or open neckline of his costume in the opening act” allowed Ludlam to play the role as he saw fit, not to trick people into believing he was something he was not, and to “pioneer the idea that female impersonation could be serious acting.” Ludlam was both making an important statement in this performance and indulging his own egotistic desire to play this part.

85 Kaufman, Ridiculous!, 186.
87 Ludlam qtd. in Kaufmann, Ridiculous!, 187.
Embedded in this performance of a dying courtesan was both the possibility for radical commentary and an actor’s attempt to show off his own chops and receive accolades for them. Although this form of extreme gender interpretation would later be more associated with performers like Ethyl Eichelberger, and would eventually lead to the form contemporarily known as “genderfuck,” Ludlam pioneered this with Camille.

Ludlam’s choice to perform the role in drag is politically significant. Ludlam himself contemplated the potential power inherent in the tale of Camille. He noted, “‘Played seriously, “Camille” would be laughed off the stage today—it’s so sentimental. … I don’t ask to be taken seriously. I invite the audience to laugh at me from the first moment by showing my chest. I’m not tricking them like those female impersonators who take off the wig at the end of the act. Yes, I want the audience to laugh, but they should also get the impact of this forbidden love—it is really tragic and shocking.’” Ludlam is able to co-opt this story and uncover deeper meaning within it. A key reason for this radical possibility in this performance is Ludlam’s use of mashup: his mixture of male and female in the lead role as well as his blending of high tragedy and low comedy in the play’s construction.

Camille, adapted by Ludlam and produced by the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in 1973, deals with human mortality. Ludlam’s play is an adaptation of the work by Alexandre Dumas fils and concludes with the heroine’s death, as the original work had. What makes the Ridiculous production unique, however, is not just the reimagining of the text. Rather, what perhaps is most distinct about the Ridiculous production is that Ludlam played Marguerite, turning the classic tragic heroine into a figure of drag

performance. It is in this element, more so than any other, that the subtle political implications of the play are betrayed.

Ludlam himself noted the inherent radical possibility embedded in his Ridiculous, or camp, adaptation of the classic melodramatic text. Ludlam states:

I think my theatre is political, but what is political is perhaps misunderstood. Politics is about spheres of influence, and in that sense it is political. If a man plays Camille, for instance, you begin to think it’s horrible, but in the end you are either moved or won over. You believe in the character beyond the gender of the actor, and no one who has experienced that can go back.

In such cases, this theatre is political in the highest sense of influence. But as far as pushing for political upheaval goes, it’s not true to the nature of art. Art is not meant to tear society down, it is meant to enhance it.\(^{89}\)

Ludlam believes that the political effect of a piece is tied up with how the spectator feels when the work is over. Ludlam claims that he does not believe that art should be used as a tool for altering society, but that art can have a political effect on the individual.

Quinton elucidates the power of the potential emotional effect of this play; after recollecting a conversation with Ludlam in which his partner told him that “he was doing the final scene and he heard a pocketbook open and the lady was getting her tissues out because she was crying,” he realized that when he “[heard] the pocketbook open” during his own performance of the role in London “that he had achieved this thing that Charles had talked about. … When I heard that pocketbook open, I said, ‘oh yes,’ I can’t tell you if I don’t achieve anything in my life beyond that … I’ll always think of that as an

\(^{89}\) Ludlam, *Scourge*, 241.
accomplishment.” Quinton understands the key to this play, the impetus behind its impact, is the emotional reality of the story; the humor is meant to be layered on after.

The political effect of Ludlam’s plays is embedded in the emotional power of the dramatic work. If the play can make its audience feel, then it can engage them politically. This is a radical definition of “political” because it is not about any specific political commitment at all. It is a politics that is not embedded in ideology or specifically engaged in debate on currently contested issues. Rather, this is an idea of the political that operates on the individual level, recouping the emotional faculties in place of the intellectual ones as the site of political efficacy. The ending of Camille is high tragedy, yet so over-the-top that it can move an audience to complete hysterics, whether they are of laughter or of tears. Like Ludlam’s presentation of gender in his performance of Marguerite, it is a mashup of the tragic and the comic. This potential for tears, as Ludlam noted, highlights the political capacity of the play. In these Ridiculous plays, meaning is made through the mixing of disparate elements together.

Ludlam’s Camille is not political in a didactic sense, nor is it protest drama. Rather, it is a dramatic work which creates an emotionally vicarious experience for an audience member, and in so doing, forces its spectators, no matter their predispositions, to mourn the stage death of a man in drag. Consider the power of Marguerite’s final speech:

I am dying, but I am happy too, and it is only my happiness that you can see…
And so you are married!… Look at that…. What a strange life this first one is. What will the second be?… You will be even happier than you were before.

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90 Quinton, interview, February 27, 2014.
Speak of me sometimes, won’t you? Armand, give me your hand. Believe me, it’s not hard to die. That’s strange…. I’m not suffering anymore. I feel better, so much better than I have ever felt before… I am going to live.⁹¹

There is a real celebration of life in these final lines; Marguerite is able to find happiness, even in this dark moment. The moment also involves a proclamation of the hope that someone may be remembered after he or she has passed. Yet this hope leads to ultimate despair; the dramatic irony is that the audience knows Marguerite will not survive even though she says she is going to live.

To see the full extent of how these lines can be taken seriously, rather than only as an over-the-top, melodramatic joke, consider them against Marguerite’s last lines in the original text:

And so I am [dying], Nichette. I can smile; for I am happy. You, too, are happy. You are a bride. You will think of me sometimes—will you not? And Gustave, too—you will speak of me together! Armand, come! Your hand! You must not leave me! Armand here, and all my friends! Oh, this is happiness! And Gaston, too! I am so glad you are come! Armand is here, and I am so happy! Oh, how strange!… All the pain is gone! Is this life? Now everything appears to change.

Oh, how beautiful! Do not wake me—I am so sleepy!⁹²

Ludlam’s adaptation is not all that different from the text of the Dumas original. Ludlam has co-opted Camille for his own Ridiculous aesthetic, but he also has rendered a loving and respectful adaptation of the Dumas text. As Linda Hutcheon points out in her book

⁹¹ Charles Ludlam, Camille, in The Complete Plays, 251.
Theory of Adaptation, “An adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing.” An adapted work can be studied in its relation to the original, but it is worthy also of contemplation in its own right, as it is in no way lesser than its source material. An adapted work of art is still an original artistic creation and therefore exists with its own set of creative objectives and artistic intentions.

In Ludlam’s play, then, these beautiful concluding lines, meant to move an audience emotionally, also can operate politically in ways that the Dumas text may not. Ludlam dares his audience to sympathize with his tragic heroine in this moment. By sympathizing, a spectator is forced, however briefly, to reconsider his or her position regarding queer politics. If one could care for this man in drag, why not care for all men in drag? By extension, why not empathize with any individuals who could be identified as queer? This reconsideration of one’s position, no matter its ultimate outcome (i.e., no matter if the person actually changes his or her stance) is a political action, as potentially powerful as any lecture drama.

Camille sums up a great deal of the aesthetic elements we associate with Ridiculous Theatre. In an article on the Ridiculous Theatrical Company written for the New York Times, Elenore Lester comments about Camille:

This quintessential scene of late-19th century melodrama, with its Beardsley-esque undertones of death and eroticism, is played on a stage so small and crowded with papier mache backdrops it looks like a puppet theatre. Heightening the artifice is Camille with, of all things, a hairy chest, a bulbous nose and a fake falsetto voice.

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Through this grotesquerie, Charles Ludlam, director-writer-performer and creator of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, releases the poetry that heretofore has been locked in banality.\(^9^4\)

In this description, Lester captures a great deal of the Ridiculous performance style and aesthetic. There are elements from different strata of society being presented alongside a character that defies easy gender categorization. This is a classic Ridiculous play and one of Ludlam’s masterpieces.

In many ways, *Camille* has been considered not only the apex of Ludlam’s Ridiculous drag performance, but of all drag performance of the period. According to Alan Sinfield in *Out on Stage*, “Ludlam, by playing the lead part in drag, transposed it to a gay man’s point of view.”\(^9^5\) The idea is that Ludlam was not just playing the part because it was a meaty role that appealed to his sensibilities—what he claimed as the justification for playing it—but also because he was a homosexual man. Rick Roemer agrees, “Ludlam’s attraction to this character was, no doubt, steeped in his homosexuality. Like most other gay men, Ludlam was made his entire life to feel like an outcast and a deviant. He felt an identification with and a compassion for Marguerite, who found herself marginalized because of who she was. … This kind of discrimination was something that Ludlam understood very well.”\(^9^6\) These scholars see this drag role as being iconic of Ludlam’s desire to expose his own oppression as a gay man through his representation of an oppressed heroine. Chesley builds on this concept to suggest, “Yet in the work of the Ridiculous, as in many other areas of life, a viewpoint informed by a

gay sensibility can possibly be seen as offering something of value to all people, regardless of sexuality.”97 There may be a quality of these productions that reflects a “gay sensibility,” but that point of view is used to get at very universal human concerns, such as love and mortality, in the case of Camille.

Although I find interesting the autobiographical potential in reading the Ridiculous artists’ works as these gay men’s perception of the world through their representation of female roles (similar claims are made regarding Ethyl Eichelberger), Ludlam’s intentions seem to have been something other than merely using a female role as a mouthpiece for his homosexual male experience of the world. My impression is that Ludlam was more interested in the performance of the role and the effect that it produced on the audience, as opposed to using the role to speak about his own experience. Of playing Camille, Ludlam states, “If we could only get that first scene of meeting her—that shock of meeting her, if you will—over with, then that pre-curtain association with sex as such, of female impersonation as such, might go away, and we could all become involved with the part as a part and the play as a play. It is not a question, really, of what man is playing the hero today or what woman is playing the heroine, but simply what is being played.”98 Ludlam wanted his audiences to value the performance as it was, as opposed to getting caught up in it as drag or what it had to say about gender. According to Chesley’s article, Ludlam dismisses any dichotomy between the concepts “heterosexual“ and “homosexual,” stating “I would not believe for a minute that we don’t have all the possibilities within us,’ Ludlam concludes. ‘Because acting, theater—

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98 Ludlam, Scourge, 42.
art would be impossible. There would be no common ground where you could communicate, with images or with anything, to other people.”

All things are possible in the Ridiculous Theatre because, for Ludlam, anything is possible within the individual.

Ludlam saw the power in what he was doing in his mashing up of gender. Firstly, he was emphasizing performance above all else; Ludlam describes, “A man or a woman might be better at evoking a specific personality or making a definite point in the play. You get different levels of reality and unreality, and what ultimately happens is that the rigidity with which we look at sexual roles and reversals breaks down.” But Ludlam was also aware of what this might insinuate about performance beyond the on-stage space. Ludlam continues, “The most profound theme of the theatre is role-play—that roles are interchangeable, that personality is an artifice in life, and that it can be changed or interchanged. I believe that is the eternal message of the theatre.” These gender mashup performances throw into relief the performative nature of gender—and even individual personality—in ways that would not be heavily theorized for at least a decade after they occurred on stage.

Yet, despite the many ways in which this play has been considered groundbreaking in terms of its statements about gender, it is also designed for sheer pleasure. In addition to the use of drag, other elements mark Camille as a Ridiculous text. The play involves various lazzi and elements of slapstick humor, such as, “GASTON throws a pie in her [Prudence’s] face.” Ludlam’s play also is filled with a great deal

100 Ibid., 45.
101 Ludlam, Scourge, 45.
102 Ludlam, Camille, 229.
of word play and jokes built into the dialogue. Playing on the double entendre of the word “faggots” (and taking into account the probable demographic of the audience and the 13th Street, New York City location of the theatre), Marguerite asks, “Nanine, throw another faggot on the fire,” to which Nanine replies, “There are no more faggots in the house.” “No faggots in the house?” Marguerite exclaims. “Open the window, Nanine. See if there are any in the street.”

This verbal repartee breaks the tension of this scene, providing not only comic relief but also a distancing from the emotional intensity of the moment. Ridiculous plays contain some telling markers of their style, such as self-awareness and metatheatricality, gender-bending, an improvisational style, and word play. The plays can be jam-packed with lots of various performance elements and often present a mocking, but good-natured sort of humor.

The meaning of any performance of *Camille* was created specifically by the audience’s emotional reaction; in this way, Ludlam continued to tap into the kind of ritual atmosphere created by his performances, which were always ghosted by the surrounding popular culture. Ludlam contends, “When the audience laughed at my pain, the play seemed more tragic to me than when they took it seriously. A solemn audience trivialized the event. This [irony] of *Camille* was the ultimate masochism. I went out there to try and have a happy ending every night and got knocked down by every peripeteia of the plot.”

The audience’s perspective on the play’s genre and their subsequent emotional reaction imbued the play with its overall effect. If the viewers could laugh at Marguerite’s pain, it proved her lot was more pathetic than if they could

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103 Ludlam, *Camille*, 246.
cry for her. The audience’s emotional reactions are crucial to the play’s interpretation. Therefore, the piece empowers its spectators.

The meaning of Ludlam’s *Camille* is in the eye of the beholder, so to speak; an individual can interpret the work as he or she sees fit. Through their emotional reactions to *Camille*, spectators became meaning-makers in their own right. The gender mashup served as a part of the overall experience; if the performance had an emotional impact, in addition to the humor raised by the drag “shtick,” then the audience would likely cry for Marguerite’s demise. If the comedy reigned above all else, they would likely leave the theatre chuckling. It seems as though either outcome would have been acceptable to Ludlam, if not for critics of the play. So long as the audience was engaged—so long as the performance gave the spectators something to walk away with emotionally—then for Ludlam it was effective enough.

**Conclusion**

Ludlam understood that “The theater is an event and not an object.”¹⁰⁵ This mentality is key to understanding what makes the Ridiculous what it is: it is a performative form, one that is engaged in using theatre in new and innovative ways without ever losing sight of the importance of entertainment in a theatrical experience. Ludlam’s contributions to American theatre, experimental drama, as well as to comedy and farce should not be denied. Ludlam brought these comic styles to the modern theatre, showing that through dramaturgical techniques of collage and remix, and performative techniques of drag and mashup, everything that was old could be new again.

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¹⁰⁵ Charles Ludlam, personal notes, found in the Charles Ludlam Papers at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.256, folder #5.
In an interview with Ted Castle for *ArtForum*, Ludlam admits, “I would say that my work falls into the classical tradition of comedy. Over the years there have been certain traditional approaches to comedy. As a modern artist you have to advance the tradition. I want to work within the tradition so that I don’t waste time trying to establish new conventions. You can be very original within the established conventions. ... The drama is the form that I’m interested in.” Ludlam found ways for old forms of comedy to speak to a contemporary audience and actually seem quite groundbreaking and innovative.

Ludlam also accomplished a feat no other American dramatist has been able to do to date: running his own theatre, producing 29 of his own original works in which he starred and for which he served as director. No other theatrical figure is as commonly linked with the Ridiculous style of performance as Charles Ludlam is. From an interest in popular culture and erudite knowledge of the dramatic canon, he synthesized a dramatic form that left open many possibilities for how a performance could be constructed, especially gender performance. Ludlam wanted to see something new in American theatre. In his own notes, he jotted, “The theater is now filled with people doing things. The world is full of people doing things. Who needs to go to the theater to see people doing things? Doing this to impress the audience makes you a performing dog. This is sick, corrupt and egoistic. Better to do nothing.”

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107 Notebook kept by Charles Ludlam, found in the Charles Ludlam Papers in the Billy Rose Theatre Collection at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, call number 8-MWEZ+n.c. 29.257, folder #6.
people do do things in a Ludlam play, these actions are often much more imaginative than what one might find in a more a conventional play from the period.

Yet Ludlam was not actually the sole creator of the movement. He fell into an intricate network of artists—many of whom were already associated with Warhol’s Factory at the time the notion of a Theatre of the Ridiculous came into existence—attempting to develop new aesthetics in their live performances. In particular, these artists, like their Pop Art colleagues and contemporaries, were interested in how they could bring their interest in popular culture icons into the more “highbrow” form of live performance. As Andy Warhol would render the design aesthetics of Campbell’s Soup Cans into icons of high art in painting, artists like Jack Smith would attempt to allow their reverence for a movie starlet like an overlooked Maria Montez to be the source for great performance.

To discuss Ludlam as unique or Ridiculous Theatre as only belonging to him is a great disservice to the study of the movement. It is my intention to cast a wider net on Theatre of the Ridiculous: to recapture the other artists who influenced and/or collaborated with Ludlam to create the style with which he would come to be almost exclusively associated. Ludlam’s short tenure at the Play-House of the Ridiculous early in his career is where he honed his style of performing and learned models of playwriting. This site was born from the association of its initial lead playwright, Ronald Tavel, and Andy Warhol, for whom Tavel would write scenarios. Warhol and his entire Pop Art aesthetic were heavily influenced by his early associations with performance artist/photographer/filmmaker Jack Smith, who exposed Warhol to experimental cinema techniques. Smith himself was not born in a vacuum; he credited much of his aesthetic to
his worship, bordering on obsession, with 1940s starlet Maria Montez, a popular film actress, who lacked some of the pedigree of her cinematic contemporaries.

Therefore, in order to lay out an accurate cartography of the Ridiculous, we must zoom out our view of Downtown New York during this period. It is not enough to focus on Ludlam, even if we take a wide stance on his work, considering his performances before and beyond Sheridan Square. To see how Ridiculous Theatre became this fascinating form that Ludlam practiced, it is essential to ground that work in a historical context, beginning with Jack Smith and his late-night loft apartment ritual extravaganzas, often performed with Maria Montez in mind. These performances, though quite different from the tight farces that Ludlam wrote and directed, are deeply entwined with Ludlam’s aesthetic. They take up the practice of revering popular culture, particularly Golden Age Hollywood films. In so doing, Smith was able to create a community of worshippers, both of himself, as Ludlam did, but also of the same twentieth-century middlebrow culture about which he felt such strong admiration. The community of the Ridiculous was continually ghosted by the popular culture of its creators’ youths.
Chapter Two

“Ridiculous Ghosts”: Cultural Ghosting in the Proto-Ridiculous Plays of Jack Smith

Charles Ludlam once stated, “Jack is the daddy of us all.”¹ The Jack of whom he speaks, experimental artist and filmmaker Jack Smith, never explicitly used the term Ridiculous to categorize his own theatrical contributions. And yet, his “ghost” infuses the entirety of the Ridiculous landscape—many of the other artists associated with the style worked with Smith and nearly all of them credit Smith as an influence on their art work. According to Uzi Parnes, recalling a conversation with performer Mario Montez, “Jack actually came up with the name for Ludlam, because … Vaccaro’s group was called the ‘Theatre of the Ridiculous,’ and so Jack suggested they call themselves the ‘Ridiculous Theatrical Company.’”² Ludlam may never have created the Ridiculous work that he did without the contributions made by Smith.

Indeed, scholars of the “Downtown Scene” believe Smith to be an important source for the experimental work that exploded there, beginning in the 1960s. In Andy Warhol and the Can That Sold the World, Gary Indiana suggests, “One explanation of Pop’s earliest influences can be found in scattered writings of the artist and filmmaker Jack Smith, whose almost secret public performances and pioneering film Flaming Creatures had a powerful influence on Robert Wilson, Andy Warhol, the Theater of the Ridiculous, and other theatrical and visual innovators.”³ In this chapter, I am building on

² Uzi Parnes, interview with the author, October 8, 2013.
³ Gary Indiana, Andy Warhol and the Can That Sold the World, (ReadHowYouWant.com: Limited, 2010), 60.
this claim in order to show that, although he never explicitly used the term Ridiculous to
describe his work, Smith’s plays were a kind of “proto-Ridiculous” creation, one that
would inspire the trajectory of the particular aesthetic associated with “Ridiculous-ness.”

Therefore, I find it crucial to study Jack Smith as a progenitor of what would
come to be considered Ridiculous Theatre at the other sites studied in this dissertation.
Smith brought together artists associated with Pop Art, to a large degree bridging what
was happening in experimental photography and cinema with theatrical experimentation.
For his theatre, he used his home as the site for performance and dictated both the start
time and the duration of the piece per his own artistic whims. The backbone of his style
was a worship of the Hollywood films of his youth; the impact of his art-making was
building a community surrounding this shared popular culture admiration.

In this chapter, I argue that this love of pop culture icons takes the form of
“ghosting,” as Marvin Carlson discusses the term in The Haunted Stage. In this work,
Carlson formulates a theory of theatrical ghosts, such as the traces of a performer’s past
roles in his future productions or the mystique of all the performers who have played an
iconic part being present in a single actor’s incarnation of the role. I adapt this idea to
works like Smith’s that had a multimedia component as well as to the Ridiculous artists’
worship of popular culture; each of their performances seems to evoke the presence of
many of their childhood movie idols. It is impossible to understand their works without
being aware of the popular culture from which it was born. Meaning is made through the
evocation of something from the past; watching these performances, then, was a shared
cultural experience. Because of the presence of these popular culture ghosts—and the
audience’s communal worship of them at Smith’s performances—a community of the
Ridiculous began to take shape. Within this community, there was also continual “ghosting”: artists borrowing or stealing ideas from one another. From Smith’s early experiments, all of the future Ridiculous theatres that I discuss were born.

To begin a discussion of Smith, I cannot ignore the link between Jack Smith and Andy Warhol; that is, the bridge between the Ridiculous and the greater cultural movement into which it is often placed, Pop Art. To a large degree, Ridiculous theatre is born of the Pop Art scene—Factory performers appeared in early Play-House of the Ridiculous works, such as *Conquest of the Universe*, under John Vaccaro’s direction (1967). Additionally, Warhol credits Smith’s films as a major influence on his own works. Much of the style of filmmaking that we have come to associate with Warhol actually was pioneered in the underground films of Smith. In general, scholars of Pop Art agree with this trajectory; many cite the connection between Warhol and Smith as crucial to Warhol’s artistic development. Artistic contemporaries and collaborators of Warhol and Smith sometimes go much further, for instance, suggesting, “Jack Smith was the real Warhol.”

Like Warhol, Ludlam and the other Ridiculous artists certainly learned from the artistic experiments that Smith began conducting in the 1960s. The significance of Smith’s “ghost” in the Ridiculous scene goes beyond mere artistic influence, however. Smith not only quoted and sampled from outside works. Rather, Smith attempted to bring to life a forgotten past, a fantasy world built from the remnants of Hollywood films of his youth and his own imagination. The ghosts of Smith’s cultural past are brought to

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life in his performances, particularly the spirit of his preeminent icon, the B-movie starlet Maria Montez.

Ghosting infused even Smith’s style of on-stage myth-making. Unlike either the early chaotic romps or the later tightly drawn farces of Charles Ludlam, Smith created sprawling, epic ceremonies, often in his loft apartment, meant only for the “initiated,” those willing to wait until the middle of the night for anything to begin. Smith did not create plays; rather, he performed rituals, a practice always preoccupied with the presence of, if not ghosts, then certainly some spiritual aspect or quality of human existence. For C.D. Innes, the link between ritual and experimental performance is a key way to understand what makes such live art avant-garde. The structure of this ritual of avant-garde theatre, according to Innes, “is characterized by merging of audience and action, by a rejection of language or verbal logic as a primary means of communication; and where the aim is to induce trance states these are active and tend toward convulsion.”\(^5\) To create this ritualistic landscape, Smith reconfigured the concept of “performance space”; the location for many of Smith’s shows was his loft, located at 36 Greene Street and renamed the “The Plaster Foundation” for purposes of his performances. By placing his spectators in his living quarters to witness his performance, Smith evoked the presence of his own self as a person, in place of the fiction of a character in a fictional stage setting, as one would find in more traditional performance. He also transformed the notion of “home”; his loft was no ordinary living space. Rather, it was a fantasyland where anything he could dream up might occur.

The works of Jack Smith, then, because of their physical setting, suggest a type of theatre creation that is not only a remaking of the artistic process but a reimagining of lifestyle as well. In addition to this phantasmagoric quality for the performance’s site, Smith’s spectacles took a great deal of time to start in the first place and then, even once they had begun, sprawled on for many hours. This extreme duration was necessary to complete the ritual that Smith was performing: the play needed to last a long time in order to ensure that all aspects were performed correctly, precisely per Smith’s vision. These ritualistic epics suggest a style of performance that dictates its own duration.

By looking at these two elements—theatrical space and time—together, it becomes clear that Smith was remaking not only the process of theatre creation, but the role of the spectator in such artistic magic-making as well. Rather than sitting by and observing what was happening, Smith often asked audience members to take a participatory role, a practice much in line with what other Downtown Scene companies were doing during the same period. For many of these others companies, such as the Living Theatre or the Performance Group, this audience interaction had political implications. What makes Smith’s version of this practice particularly “Ridiculous” is precisely that this audience interaction was not explicitly political, yet still had a radical quality to it. Instead of political didacticism, the notion in these performances is that the audience is always included as members of the community of performance; the Ridiculous community is not built around shared politics, but around shared popular culture. One came to the temple at The Plaster Foundation not to engage in political

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6 Jack Smith was a key influence on Andy Warhol, which I discuss in a later section of this chapter. In terms of durationality, Smith’s impact is clear; films like Warhol’s Empire (1964) are entirely preoccupied with long stretches of time and the things that happen, and do not happen, during that time.
debate or receive political instruction, nor to worship gods, but to bow down at the altar of pop culture icons such as Maria Montez and, by extension, Jack Smith, whose art had brought them to life.

In this sense, “ghosting” in performance is key to understanding the Ridiculous. It takes the Ridiculous reverence for popular culture to a much deeper level. A love of the popular is not just an aspect of these performances; it is an ideology, a driving force behind their construction. Smith and others like him were creating these shows so as to raise the ghosts of their heroes, especially those forgotten or ignored by mainstream society, like Maria Montez. They were creating their own fantasy world in which these icons not only still existed but could be embodied by the performer. In ghosting, a current performance is haunted by some image of performance from the past (whether that is a particular piece, a certain performer, a theatre space’s history, and so on) while still creating something new on stage.

In addition, the Ridiculous artists were building a framework from their cultural past, one which other artists could then later reference, particularly fellow gay artists. Richard Dyer’s analysis of film in *The Culture of Queers* applies as well to Theatre of the Ridiculous because of:

their access to filmic and lesbian/gay sub-cultural discourses. In other words, because they were lesbian or gay, they could produce lesbian/gay representations that could themselves be considered lesbian/gay, not because all lesbians or gay men inevitably express themselves on film in a certain way, but because they had
access to, and an inwardness with, lesbian/gay sign systems that would have been like foreign languages to the straight filmmakers.\(^7\)

These artists were already part of a shared community—their overlapping preoccupations with film stars like Maria Montez proves this—but they were also in the process of contributing to that community. The Ridiculous developed its own language of references relevant only to others who shared their particular sensibility. In this right, the Ridiculous was both part of a larger gay male cultural identity, and ghosted by that identity, while also building a new community through the shared cultural lexicon born of their cultural past.

In the Ridiculous, ghosting is not just an aesthetic tool; it is an actual element of the movement. These artists built on the works of their predecessors in order to assert their own cultural presence as gay men. In *The Meaning of Gay*, Todd J. Ormsbee writes, “The most common and perhaps most powerful way gay men sought a cultural heritage was their look to the past for a feeling of connectedness through a *gay history*, which would be both a history of gay men themselves and history with a gay sensibility.”\(^8\) In this sense, Ludlam’s claim of Smith as a father figure makes sense; he was asserting a lineage for his Ridiculous aesthetic within his community of fellow gay male artists.

Indeed, ghosting is perhaps the main way through which Smith endures in the memory of the Downtown Scene. He is looked at, principally, as an influence on others, as opposed to being studied in his own right. As Sally Banes writes, “So much of what is central to current performance art—allusions to Hollywood, TV, and other aspects of


mass culture; fusions of the home-made and the esoteric; funky, deliberately amateurish acting styles—stems from a set of fascinations and obsessions that can be traced back to Smith’s sensibility.”9 Indeed, Smith’s influence can be found throughout Ridiculous work; he not only influenced Warhol but the entirety of the Ridiculous scene. In her recent article, Rachel Joseph also recognizes that it is possible to “categorize” Smith among these artists, but that doing so limits the narrative that can be told about Smith’s work.10 Although I agree that Smith can be discussed without needing to connect him to the larger Ridiculous scene, I do not believe that the Ridiculous, as either an aesthetic or a theatrical movement, can be discussed in full without recognizing the incredible influence that Smith’s live performance art pieces had on the form.

Despite this incredible impact, Smith was never satisfied with how his aesthetic concepts were changed by those who borrowed them. Ghosting as a tool for building cultural heritage can, therefore, be a fraught process. Though Ludlam once celebrated the inheritance that he received from Smith, citing him as a progenitor and father figure, Smith bemoaned the development of the Ridiculous aesthetic that Ludlam would later accomplish. As Joe Pogostin recollects, during a performance in which an actress was not taking her role seriously, “Jack shouted, ‘If you can’t be serious while saying your lines get off the stage. Lest we all end up like poor Charles Ludlam!’ a damning epitaph on the corruption of the camp aesthetic into farce.”11 These Ridiculous artists may all have been citing one another—mixing the styles of those working around them into their

own artistic creations—but it was not always a happy blend. A Ridiculous text is certainly marked by a combining of elements and the ghosts of many other cultural icons, but the process of remixing is sometimes burdened with very personal tension. These artists borrowed heavily from one another—Andy Warhol, for one, basically usurped cinematic techniques from Smith—which created a community that is forever ghosted. These gay male artists built an aesthetic around their shared cultural interests, but also on the backs of one another.

In this chapter, I sort through that mix of elements in order to better trace the trajectory of the development of the Ridiculous scene and aesthetic than has previously been accomplished. I look at Maria Montez separately, as the quintessential “mommy” of the Ridiculous, and trace her impact throughout the Ridiculous landscape, not just on Smith alone. I then highlight Smith’s contributions to live performance, particularly two of his “Atlantis” works, Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis and Brassieres of Atlantis, which have gone without appropriate recognition or study, as well as his What’s Underground About Marshmallows?. This last production became a ghost in its own right, as Ron Vawter would adapt the piece as part of his Jack Smith/Roy Cohn performance. Working with Smith play texts opens up the discussion of production techniques—setting, duration, and audience interaction—in Smith’s performances, insofar as they were created as rituals to engage this Montezian atmosphere. Finally, I show how ghosting was a powerful force in Smith’s career, the specter of Maria Montez haunted his own work just as his spirit would pervade the larger Pop Art and Ridiculous scenes.
The Life & Times of Jack Smith

For Jack Smith, as well as for many of the other artists associated with the Ridiculous, films of the 1940s were the most important components of their cultural heritage. Uzi Parnes notes of Smith, “[his] favorite pastime while growing up was going to the movies, and he spent most of his Saturdays at the matinee where he often sat through the film several times. He particularly savored the lush exotic Technicolor productions that starred the likes of Maria Montez and Yvonne De Carlo.”\(^\text{12}\) As children and adolescents, these future artists delighted in seeing these full-color spectacles on screen and would keep these images in their minds, attempting to recreate it in their on-stage endeavors. Smith’s sister, Sue Slater, mentions putting on shows with her brother in their garage, with him as director-playwright. In addition, she reiterates his love of going to the cinema; she remembers, “Every Saturday we’d go to the movies. That was our treat. That’s where he fell in love with Maria Montez.”\(^\text{13}\)

Smith’s upbringing, according to his sister, was a bit unconventional, with her mother remarrying more than once and the family moving a number of times.\(^\text{14}\) Jack Smith was born in Columbus, Ohio in 1932, but moved first to Texas, and then to Wisconsin at the age of thirteen. After graduating high school, he moved on his own to Chicago in 1951, then to Los Angeles in 1952, and finally to New York in 1953. Smith made his first film, *Buzzards Over Baghdad* in the same year and studied film at the City...
Smith was not only a filmmaker, however; he was also a photographer, publishing *The Beautiful Book* in 1962.\(^{15}\)

In 1963, in addition to solidifying his connection to Andy Warhol and the Factory scene through various trips to Coney Island,\(^{16}\) Smith would also release his most significant film, *Flaming Creatures*, which, thanks to a combination of the fortitude of Jonas Mekas and the influence of scandal on popularity, would go on to be a commonly screened, and commonly raided, cinematic presentation. Smith would combine filmed works with live performance, a practice known as “expanded cinema,” and, by 1968, had transitioned to creating live performances in his loft apartment, “The Plaster Foundation.”

His theatrical works connected him with a larger downtown scene of experimentation in live performance, such as productions by Robert Wilson. By the 1970s, Smith had created some of his most frequently used artistic images, such as the lobster and “a toy penguin as a ‘surrogate for himself and Maria Montez’… named Yolanda La Pinguina or Inez the Penguin.”\(^{17}\) Smith continued performing in clubs throughout Downtown New York into the 1980s.\(^{18}\) He passed away in 1989 from pneumonia due to AIDS. His work was always interested in mixing popular culture—like references to movie star Maria Montez—with more formal aesthetic experimentation, much like the many Ridiculous artists that he would go on to inspire.

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
Maria Montez: Goddess of the Ridiculous

The importance of idol worship of these Golden Age movie actresses to the Ridiculous community cannot be underestimated. Of Jack Smith, Ridiculous scholar Joe E. Jeffreys contends:

Smith’s work as a whole—and indeed the entire Ridiculous aesthetic approach which he is credited with pioneering—may be seen as evolving out of Montez and her films. In Smith’s work, as in Montez’s, vaguely Middle Eastern, Arabian or tropical locales are du rigueur. Arabesque arches, Persian carpets, and divans are routine elements in both. Smith’s work captured the immediate look of Montez’s and held it hostage in the face of even smaller budgets.\(^{19}\)

Using the limited resources at his disposal, Smith attempted to recreate the worlds of his favorite actress’s films. He not only idolized Ms. Montez; he went so far as to attempt to evoke her in the realm of his own performances. Her ghost is clearly present throughout all of Smith’s oeuvre.

Maria Montez could be seen as the spiritual mother for the movement that I am calling Ridiculous. To be truly Ridiculous, with the capital “R,” as opposed to simply stylistically similar, an artist must have been somehow committed to the kind of Montez-worship associated with Smith. Joseph makes a compelling case for the ways in which Smith’s emulation of Montez were precisely tied up with her lack of talent.\(^{20}\) This, like Smith’s obsession with “trash” objects, allowed notions of self-formation to include the


concept of “creature,” above and beyond simply the identities of “male” or “female.” Joseph elucidates how this manifests in Smith’s iconic film Flaming Creatures, his best known work. I have chosen not to cover this film in depth here, as it has already been well-documented.21 Rather, I would like to extend Joseph’s argument about Smith’s worship of Montez to his lesser-known live performance art pieces. I am interested in these works because they link him more concretely with the rest of the Ridiculous cadre of artists, who principally worked in live media. With Maria Montez as the icon of femininity, Smith’s role as the “daddy” of the entire experimental performance scene of the 1960s and 70s, as Ludlam contended, becomes even more solidified.

Smith brought Montez iconography directly into his art; in his most influential work, Flaming Creatures, this was through the presence of drag performer Mario Montez: “Smith convinced a young Hispanic Post Office worker he met late one night on the subway to act in the film in the guise of Maria Montez, the Hollywood star of the early 1940s films Smith so admired. The young man became a central image in the film and eventually adopted the name Mario Montez.”22 The significance of Flaming Creatures cannot be underestimated; in Christopher Gair’s opinion films like Smith’s Flaming Creatures and Ken Jacobs’s Blonde Cobra (1959) “served as models for the pop art of the 1960s.”23 This work was seminal in the foundation of what would come to be called Pop Art and, eventually, Theatre of the Ridiculous.

21 For more on Flaming Creatures, see J. Hoberman, On Jack’s Smith’s Flaming Creatures (and Other Secret-Flix of Cinemaroc) (New York: Granary Books/Hips Road, 2001).
The presence of Montez iconography in *Flaming Creatures* is not unique to this one work, however. The essence of Maria Montez, as it were, permeates all of Smith’s artistic creations. He was constantly trying to “raise the dead” in his performances: Smith attempted to bring to life the film icons and the Hollywood fantasy-land that he had grown up witnessing in his local movie houses. His *What’s Underground about Marshmallows?* (1981), for example, includes an extensive list of Montez’s film performances, followed by “the first thing you notice as you enter the round socialistic movie studio … the temple of the sacred brassiere of Maria Montez …”24 Her undergarment was seen as “sacred” in this all-important cinematic site. She was the object to be worshipped and the Ridiculous is clearly engaged in this practice. Maria Montez ghosting, then, is a powerful force throughout the Ridiculous.

Indeed, incarnations of Maria Montez are everywhere in the Theatre of the Ridiculous; Ludlam, for example, created an homage to her classic *Cobra Woman* with the “Cobra Cunt Ceremony” in his *Big Hotel* (1967). Yet it was more than just referencing her films that mattered about Montez to the Ridiculous artists. As Ronald Tavel suggests, “Other stars have provided an image in which to live: Maria Montez provided a vocabulary in which to robe and narrate some of the more memorably vanguard and radical art of our time.”25 Tavel’s interpretation of Montez mirrors Smith’s ideas about art. Smith writes in “Art and Art History”:

> But the art ideas about art are so perverted that, uh, its [*sic*] become a guessing game—one year its [*sic*] confused with Katherine Hepburn’s jaw line, another

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year—this year it happens to be uh, its mistaken for, um, a grosser kind of sleaze than has ever been imagined before. But they do think that it has something to do with sleaze, but I think that’s one thing they are sure of… and uh, but this is such a useless idea of art, as a matter of fact, in this perverted time of art that we’ve evolved, uselessness is the most prized quality—the more spectacular and idiotic and useless the better.  

Rather than being preoccupied with “sleaziness” or mainstream film stars, like Hepburn, Smith wants to bring glamour back into art along with the commonplace. For him, as well as for most of the Ridiculous artists, there was no better icon of this remix of the common and the fabulous than Maria Montez.

Montez starred in a number of films during the 1940s, many alongside actor Jon Hall. As Jack Sargeant describes, “These films were characterized by a visual and narrative thematic of magical exotica.” Her career was short, as she died in 1951. Her death, it seems, was almost as fabulous as her life; “in order to lose weight Montez began to bathe in scalding hot salt water and eventually died as a result of a heart attack caused by the extremity of this treatment.” Steven Watson believes it was precisely the way that she died that made Smith such a devotee. Watson writes, “The publicity surrounding Maria Montez’s death caught Smith’s attention. He started calling her ‘the Marvelous One,’ erected an altar to her in his cluttered apartment, and lit candles to her twenty-four

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28 Ibid.
hours a day.”²⁹ Whatever its cause, Smith’s love for Montez went beyond basic celebrity worship; this was something much deeper.

What was so special about Maria Montez? The Dominican performer, who failed as a stage actress before solidifying her career as a star in the cinema, possessed a “dissonant pleasure … whose performance maintains an intensity, rather than authenticity, of character.”³⁰ Montez played every role with a great deal of energy, truly performing the character, as opposed to becoming the persona being portrayed, as is done in more realistic performance. Smith was taken with the aspects of Montez that were most disposable; “‘Trash,’ he proclaimed, ‘is the material of creators.’”³¹ Like the proliferation of junk that would litter his stages, Smith allowed the worst, which were also the best, aspects of Montez’s acting style to permeate his own performance techniques.

Therefore, there is a larger thematic quality that comes to light when one scrutinizes this obsession with a B-movie star. There is a kind of disconnect that is thrown into relief: the chasm between beauty and the grotesque, the thin line between art and travesty. Although most of the writers that Richard Dyer quotes in Heavenly Bodies share positive impressions about Judy Garland—another female star who serves as a gay male icon—he also includes a more negative interpretation of her image. Dyer writes:

[Certain “gay fans”] can only read Garland in a gay way that is negative (“hysteria,” “exhibitionistic”)—they are recognizing a quality of emotional

³⁰ Sargeant, Naked Lens, 102.
intensity that is in fact what the other gay writers also emphasize but they give it a
denigratory label. … Garland could also be used in this subcultural discourse,
more queer than gay, that spoke of homosexual identity in self-oppressive modes
characteristic of oppressed groups—distancing, denying, denigrating. Aspects of
Garland’s career and performance could be seen as pathetic and God-awful, and
gay men could as it were misrecognize themselves in that and hasten … to disown
it. ³²

Part of the appeal of Judy Garland could have been the more negative aspects of her
career: the way in which she succumbed to the pressures of being a mega-star with
“hysteria.” Dyer suggests that for some this aspect of Garland’s persona is uniquely
appealing because it seems to reflect some aspect of the gay male experience; this
becomes both a source of identification and a point of denial. To some degree, Montez
worship operates similarly to Garland love; there is both a self-affirming quality in the
positive aspects of her technique as well as a reflection of what some might consider a
failure in quality. This is reminiscent of Jack Halberstam’s construction of the queer
value of failure. ³³

It is precisely Montez’s failure to be a “great actress” that made her Smith’s most
favored actress and a symbol for all of the Ridiculous artists who built on his style of
performance-making, as Joseph claimed. Here, I am building on the idea presented by
Joseph in order to argue that this interest in something that can be seen as both beautiful
and trashy is linked directly to these artists’ Downtown Scene setting. For playwright

³² Richard Dyer, Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society (New York: Psychology Press,
2004), 143.
³³ See Jack Halberstam, The Queer of Art Failure (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,
2011).
Ronald Tavel, for example, it was this mixture of beauty and rubbish that stood out in Smith’s adoration of Montez and his love of his neighborhood. Tavel recalls:

And, in a sense, Montezland was the Lower East Side Jack lived in, when we walked-a-nightaway SoHo before it was called that, silhouette-wet and deserted, or to the abandoned synagogue below Houston and beyond Norfolk, a Levantine carpet-borne enticement unbelievably there, with minaret window niches, gilt crescent arches, blue mosaic walls with artfully domed, empty recesses. He took me there when the moon was full, and he’d rush ecstatically down and up the dark, broken staircases into the breathless romance of its shattered towers.34

Montez, with her own flawed artistic beauty, was, for Smith, somehow iconic of his particular experience of his own downtown scene, of the culture in which he created his works of art. All of the elements of his geographic setting—both his neighborhood and his loft/theatre—were like Montez; they were both beautiful and damaged, remarkable and commonplace, magical and mundane simultaneously.

Maria Montez is most famous for her exotic dramas, such as 1944’s Cobra Woman, a performance often referenced or parodied in Ridiculous plays, like Charles Ludlam’s Big Hotel. As a fellow fan of Montez, I can see what about this performance appealed to the Ridiculous creators; there is a clear disavowal of realism in Montez’s incarnation of the title character. She presents the scene to the audience, as opposed to trying to make the audience believe in the reality of what is occurring on screen. She is also exquisitely glamorous, donning an ornate, gigantic golden headdress and an intricately detailed cloak. Many of Smith’s “Baghdad”-style costumes hearken back to

34 Tavel, “Maria Montez,” Flaming Creature, 95.
this wardrobe; golden thread, gemstones, and bright colors were all regularly used in his mode of dress. The entire movie is epic in scope, bringing together the best qualities of melodrama and cinema into a sprawling and entertaining film.

Smith was not unique in his idol worship of Maria Montez. Even the academic-leaning Tavel takes the time to sing the praises of the Hollywood star, without whom perhaps none of the Ridiculous magic could have occurred. Tavel pronounces:

Enough has been said about the Theatre of the Ridiculous for me not to have to note that the paradigm she [Montez] breathed breath into by being, in no conventional reading of the phrase, a professional performer, was crucial to my decision to come to theater, and to what I’d have of it. What makes her so obsession-fomenting, and so the well-spring of iconoclastic and humanistic speculation is what she can do, display, and reveal in the “surround” of acting; it held and still holds whatever interest I have in theater, or need to have in film. What Tavel is suggesting, and what cannot be denied when studying the Theatre of the Ridiculous, is that film actress Montez was the single most important cultural influence on the performance aesthetic that would be used in Ridiculous productions. Her style of performance was these artists’ model for acting technique and her standard of feminine beauty was the glamour to which they aspired.

This dedication to Montez could be mystifying for anyone who is not a Montez devotee. In fact, for anyone who has ever seen a Montez film, this may be surprising to consider. As Watson so elegantly puts it in Factory Made: Warhol and the Sixties, “By

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35 Some of these pieces, particularly the male brassieres, were on display at the Whitney Museum, New York City, as part of the 2013–2014 exhibit, Rituals of Rented Island.

36 Tavel, “Maria Montez,” 100.
prevailing critical standards Maria Montez’s acting was abysmal.” It was not her acting
talent, according to Watson, that made her a box office success; rather, it was her exotic
beauty that made her “Universal’s biggest star during World War II.” Even her Internet
Movie Database entry proclaims, “her pictures soon became immensely popular, even
though she could not really act, could not dance and could not sing.” The Ridiculous
artists often hold Montez up as the paragon of movie star greatness, yet for all intents and
purposes, she failed to become a great actress by Hollywood standards. In this way, the
Ridiculous reverence for Montez is a good example of a blend of cultural layers: a
popular star whose “artistry” defied conventions was held up as the epitome of exquisite
talent.

Ms. Montez was not just an influence on or an inspiration to Ridiculous artists;
recreating her glamour and style and the fantasyland in which her movies took place was
at the heart of why these artists chose to create performances and films in the first place.
Tavel articulates this obsession best: “If anyone was a diva, she [Montez] was; when she
sat in a room, that’s who you looked at and no one else. … She is bringing this fantasy
world, breathing life into it and making it a place for you to live in, you the oppressed and
did you ever feel oppressed as a six-year-old gay boy. Did you ever.”

Admiration for Montez went beyond even celebrity-worship. She somehow embodied these ostracized
youths’ desire for escape and for fantasy. Nowhere was this impact more deeply felt than

37 Watson, Factory Made, 52.
38 Internet Movie Database Entry on Maria Montez,
39 Tavel, Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis documentary.
in the performances of Jack Smith. These performances were literally ghosted by Maria Montez; each night’s epic spectacle was, on some level, a ritual in her honor.

This reverence for Montez was not meant in some postmodern way, either in quotation marks or as a form of irony. Ludlam, Smith, Tavel, Ethyl Eichelberger, John Vaccaro, and others associated with the Ridiculous did in fact revere Ms. Montez as a screen goddess. In light of this fact, Douglas Crimp asks, “Did Smith love Maria Montez ironically? Was she, for Smith, so bad she was good?” and responds, “Certainly not, if we are to take him at his word.” Crimp engages Marc Siegel’s reading of Smith’s Montez worship, highlighting the importance of the ways in which she allowed her belief in the fantasies that she performed on screen to allow such fantasies the possibility of being manifest in the real world. In this way, for the Ridiculous artists, it was essential to capture her fantastical quality in their own performances.

Ethyl Eichelberger, to give another example, was also taken with Maria Montez, capturing her essence of fantasy in his use of homemade “trash” costume accessories. Eichelberger created his own character based on her, known as Lola Montez. Jeffreys describes, “Lola Montez is set in San Francisco during one of the heroine’s American lecture/dance demonstrations. … Lit cigar in hand and cracking a whip, Eichelberger enters and dances the eccentric Spider Dance to pre-recorded music spinning out the dress’s yards of fabric and fringe.” This eccentric portrayal of a character based on Maria Montez not only allowed Eichelberger to embody his heroine, but also to shed some light on her much-overlooked life. Eichelberger, like Smith, evoked the ghost of

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41 Jeffreys, “An Outré Entrée,” 111. The dress, incidentally, was a costume piece that Ludlam rejected for his own iconic Camille.
Maria Montez on stage, despite being a man playing at being a woman. If Montez was indeed “the apotheosis of the drag queen,” as Vaccaro contends, in her performance style, then these male performers wishing to become her in their own cross-dressed performances would have wanted to maintain a similar anti-realist acting style to the one that Montez used. Their performances would be a drag of a drag, a cultural blend of the performativity of performance.

The Ridiculous interest in an anti-realist acting style could indeed have been derived directly from their Montez idol worship, as Montez was the touchstone for acting talent among Ridiculous artists. Jeffreys writes, “Smith also strove to emulate another aspect of Montez’s work, one that he greatly admired—her acting style.” Smith called what he was doing the “Reptilian Acting Style,” “an extension of the common sense approach of Lee Strasberg [that] would seem to be saying let’s not pretend—this could affect thinking.” Based on Smith’s description in this article, it seems that he wants to make acting more real by basically having his actors not act; the “technique rests on the premise that everybody is already a fine actor.” In this right, Montez would be the best actress; she did little that would be considered realistic acting on screen. In its place, she was very much herself in front of the camera, drawing attention to the fact that she was performing, delighting in the glamour and the presentational qualities of such an activity.

Perhaps this was why Smith and other Ridiculous artists saw her as the epitome of greatness on screen, due in large part to her glamour and to her on-screen charisma, as

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42 Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis documentary
45 Ibid., 166.
well as the fact that she could command a scene simply by being present in it. She did not need to work at character—Maria Montez was compelling to watch simply by being herself, as opposed to becoming the character who she was portraying. Basing their acting technique on her performances lent a unique brand of antirealism to the plays of the Ridiculous. In *Naked Lens: Beat Cinema*, Jack Sargeant suggests, “Costume and the accompanying performance necessary to create the illusion of being ‘other,’ thus draws attention to the constructed nature of identity. Identity is not fixed, but in a continual morphogenic flux and is best understood as fluid, able to transform, to be in a continual state of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’” These artists were precisely interested in the way character can be put on—or, put another way, the performative nature of identity—as opposed to creating the reality of particular characters on stage. Smith did not try to be Montez in his performances; rather he attempted to experience what it would be like to be in the process of “becoming” his film idol. He wanted to raise her ghost on his stage, to embody it for a time, and then to return to the real world once the performance ritual was complete.

**Jack Smith’s Rituals and Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis**

One way in which Smith attempted to engage the ghost of his (pop) cultural past was through the initiation of an on-stage ritual. Upon arriving at The Plaster Foundation for a performance, Stefan Brecht, a critic and frequenter of Ridiculous plays, found that there was no set starting time for the performance—nor was there any guarantee of a performance at all. Rather, people were simply milling about and Smith offered the

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option to “just listen to some records.”**47** There is none of the formality that usually accompanies attending a theatrical production; the show would start whenever Smith decided it should begin, or never, if that’s what the company assembled decided was best. Additionally, once begun, a Jack Smith performance could go on for any unspecified length of time. From Brecht’s description, it is clear that the lack of structure for the evening allowed the performance to meander on for many hours. Brecht relates, “It is very late. … Almost everybody has left.”**48** These performances would sprawl on well into the wee hours of the morning. In this way, the art existed outside of or even beyond the normal time constraints for performance. Although transcripts from Smith performances cannot give a complete sense of what these works were like when performed live—the scenarios are more fragments than play texts—they do expose certain recurring Smith iconography and display the unrealistic nature of his performance works.

Smith recognized that his works were perhaps more ritual than play. His expanded cinema piece, *Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis* (1965), presented at Film-Makers’ Cinematheque and including such auspicious Ridiculous names as Mario Montez and John Vaccaro in its cast list, is subtitled “A Dream Weapon Ritual.” The play text itself is more scenario than script; it describes what would happen in the performance and dictates actions, for performers and spectators alike. After setting the time and place for the performance, the text directs, “The audience files in blindfolded. Their files are taken from them and the usherettes (very tough Lesbians) (in matron uniforms) see that all the blindfolds are in place. A man in the audience objects to his

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blindfold. He is roughly cuffed and manhandled by the usherettes into submission to the bandage. Chloroform could be used.”

Three things are apparent from this description: (1) Smith is imagining a theatrical world in which the audience takes on an active role; (2) Smith would need to instruct his audience members on what to do (he could not expect these actions to happen spontaneously on their own); and (3) the audience can be treated with cruelty if they do not follow the instructions correctly.

*Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis* continues much in this manner, describing what is expected of the spectators with as much if not more precision than the performers’ actions are inscribed. This direction was to be provided directly to the audience in attendance by a p.a. system. The announcements begin, “You are to imagine that you are a wino. This afternoon you were overcome by a fit of drowsiness and you slumped to the sidewalk. You lay there in the sun—baking and half asleep.”

This use of the second person address lasts until the curtain rises, about a half a page later. Clearly, much of this performance was designed to situate the audience into a particular context, a place that Smith labeled as “Atlantis,” before the actual action of the drama could begin.

The play fragment that remains suggests a bizarre fantasy world being evoked on stage, one in which marijuana is celebrated, lobsters are anthropomorphized, and Mario Montez dances Swan Lake. Plot is not critical here, nor is it easy to surmise exactly what the narrative might be or mean. Rather, the piece reads as a kind of spectacular pageant, one that keeps marijuana at the forefront of its celebratory exercises. The world of this

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50 Jack Smith, *Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis*. 113
play is all illusion; at one point, a character “returns with the moon held as a platter &
goes past twins to hang it up. As she passes them—they pick up a paper off the moon.”
Indeed, Smith’s work is preoccupied with dreams and the subconscious, both in terms of
fantastic splendor and nightmarish cruelty. Smith would need a setting for his
productions that could capture this imagined fantasy world, one that reflected both his
worship of Maria Montez and his own subconscious simultaneously.

If Maria Montez’s main influence on the Ridiculous was the link the artists made
between her and their own fantasies of escape and pleasure, then the setting for Smith’s
rituals, the titular “Atlantis,” would have to be constructed to honor her image. Although
this work was not presented at Smith’s “Plaster Foundation” loft, it is clear that he is
interested in fantasy settings, even for this piece. References to Atlantis are quite
common in Smith’s work. But how could such a fantastical setting be evoked per
Smith’s vision? To maintain the essential sense of fantasy in these works, setting would
become a critical aspect of Smith’s performance art pieces as he continued to perform
into the 1970s and 1980s.

Tavel agrees that it was through stage space, above all else, in which Maria
Montez’s ghost made her presence known in Smith’s work. Tavel contends, “But her
more ultimate influence on him [Smith], and his ultimate tribute to her was the rebuilding
of Baghdad/Babylonia into his apartments, a city, a world, a wall, a building. He had
duplex lofts in Soho and removed the floor between them to construct, virtually by
himself, and ostensibly for a projected picture called Sinbad, a cathedralling set that
remind of Fairbanks, Sr.’s silent, Thief of Bagdad: but which got its seed from Maria’s

51 Jack Smith, Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis.
The setting of Smith’s loft suggested the exotic settings of Montez’s films. The site of performance was always an unrealistic, exoticized fantasy-land.

**Brassieres of Atlantis and Secrets of the Brassiere Mus**

Besides the overall “Maria Montez motif” embedded in the setting, certain visual icons appear over and over in Smith’s work, emphasizing that these performances are not designed to be Realist portraits of daily life. The presence of lobsters, for example, was a common image, as were references to brassieres and the setting of Atlantis. Another extant fragment of play text is Smith’s *Brassieres of Atlantis* (No Copyright), subtitled “A Lobster Sunset Pageant.” This piece is noted on the front cover of Smith’s handwritten document as being presented by The Reptilian Theatrical Company. This name is particularly interesting, as it gives Smith’s company (whoever they might be) the same initials as Charles Ludlam’s more famous theatrical troupe, The Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

On this detailed title page, as with *Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis*, there is no mention of this being a play or a drama; it is a pageant meant to occur in this fantastical setting. Once again, the audience finds themselves confronted with Smith’s imagined Atlantis, though this is “10 million B.C. in the Prehistoric Brassiere Atlantis of the Future.” Brassieres, it is clear, are another common image in Smith’s plays. Here the audience will see “the secret horrors of the Brassiere World!!!” as though this were

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54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
some bizarre carnival attraction in this seemingly impossible place and time. As this setting is an imagined impossibility, it has room within it for anything and everything, much like the more formal dramatic texts of the other Ridiculous writers.

This “Sunset Pageant,” whatever that means, much like the previously discussed “Atlantis” play, has little in the way of plot. What it does include are, once again, references to lobsters and another common Smith trope, the use of “Noxzema” as a character name. Here, we have “LITTLE NOXZEMA—Cylindrical Brassiere Girl of the Future.” Most of the performance seems to center around a strange dance that Noxzema performs, known as the “FORBIDDEN DANCE of the Lost Continent of Farblonjet!” The title of this place is hard to ignore, as Charles Ludlam, too, had a play that referenced such a fictional place, entitled Der Ring Gott Farblonjet. This one strange bit of wordsmithing appears in two places in the Ridiculous scene. Smith created a forbidden dance of Farblonjet that ends in both a mess of milk and foam on stage, followed by a procession featuring “A huge lobster.” There are subtle references to capitalism, a favorite target of Smith’s, in the mention of “CRAB OGRESS of Claptalism!!”\(^{56}\) This use of commercial iconography as a route to provide commentary on the middlebrow fascination with commodity culture would become a feature of Ridiculous plays in the Play-House of the Ridiculous as well.

Physical objects are a crucial aspect of Smith’s performances. On the front page of Brassieres of Atlantis, Smith calls for “A volcano-pyramid, in front of which there is a pile of garbage and to the right of which there is a clump of cornstalks growing, forms the

\(^{56}\) Jack Smith, Brassieres of Atlantis.
background of the pageant."

Indeed, the presence of stage properties, which Smith makes a point of mentioning outright, or perhaps what might more precisely be considered clutter or junk, is another marker of Smith’s work. In general, there was a proliferation of objects on stage in these productions. This interest in the artistic value of physical things links Smith with other avant-garde work of the twentieth century. In his contribution to *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde*, Laurence Senelick notes the significance of “things” in avant-garde works. In Senelick’s estimation, “in pictorial and graphic arts, the artist channeled and manipulated the object to create an entity… that thwarted expectations of functionality or aesthetics. In the performing arts, a more common or literal practice was to show the performer at loggerheads with the physical object.”

The arrangement of things could either be to question the meaning of art in light of the usefulness of an object or to question the meaning of reality in light of the act of performance. As the Ridiculous is preoccupied with both consumable and disposable items in their work, it is no wonder that physical objects play such a critical role. Their proliferation is iconic of the consumerist culture in which these artists were creating their work.

*Secrets of the Brass. Mus*, an even odder fragment with an even more fragmented title, also welcomes its audience to Atlantis, but it is now clear that this is the Plaster Foundation incarnation. Dancing once again breaks out and references once again are made to breasts, milk and Atlantis. Noxzema returns as a character, as does a character called Steve Adore. Yet, here, Atlantis is a place that needs to be rented; Steve Adore

57 Jack Smith, *Brassieres of Atlantis*.
implores: “Pardon Me/Forgetting to pay the rental/Of Atlantis!!!”⁵⁹ Here the commentary on capitalism is not even shaded in the text, it is stated outright. It is hard to make much of these pages as they seem incomplete and somewhat disconnected, though they do appear together in the Museum of Modern Art archive of Jack Smith materials. What is clear from studying both is that Smith maintained a commitment to certain ideas and particular images across his varied performance art works.

It could be that these are versions of the same play in different stages of Smith’s performance repertoire. To some extent, all of his plays are “rehearsals” of the same thematic and iconic elements over and over again. Smith ghosts all of his own works, even as he evokes other provocative pop cultural ghosts. He made artistic meaning out of everything around him, even his own negative experiences with the artistic scene. This is particularly clear in his taped work, What’s Underground About Marshmallows?.

What’s Underground About Marshmallows?

Smith’s 1981 recorded work, What’s Underground About Marshmallows? acts as an interesting summation of his previous two decades of work. Although the piece is once again non-linear, there is a sense in which it is a musing over the work that he has done. He speaks in the first person and makes references to the fact that “I have to live in squalor” and encounters with “Uncle Art Krust” and “Uncle Roachcrust.” These could be seen as autobiographical references; Smith never made a great sum of money for his art and felt as though his art, especially Flaming Creatures, had been stolen from him by art distributors and displayers. In particular, the “Uncle” of which he speaks is likely Jonas Mekas; according to the documentary Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis,

even Mekas recognized that Smith had all sorts of nasty names like these for him. This was another common reference in Smith’s plays.

Much of Marshmallow describes how “Uncle Pawnshop” stole his film, while still including the metatheatrical elements that one would come to expect from Smith’s performance art. The narrator tells when it is intermission and later calls out for coffee, never giving the illusion that this tape is recording a scripted drama. Rather, this is realistic in the sense of actually being “real”; this is Smith telling his own story as he wishes to tell it. The second side of the tape once again brings Maria Montez to life, getting caught up in her films. What’s Underground About Marshmallows sums up many of the key elements that Smith engages in his performance work.

The rituals that Smith created certainly attempted to engage icons and imagery with which he felt a personal connection. Maria Montezian style served as the basis for the design aesthetic while the rest of the production was sprinkled with objects and ideas that Smith found provocative. Yet, for a ritual to work, the audience must have some important role to play; Smith’s theatre is no exception. His rituals were particularly provocative because of the performance language they employed; the repeated images (such as Atlantis or the lobster) would have become familiar to his spectators. Every Smith production was, to some degree, ghosted by those that had preceded it. In these works, meaning was best made by individuals who were already aware of Smith’s work and what it entailed. Ghosting was used to create an audience of aficionados who could truly appreciate these late-night, sprawling, at-home productions.

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60 Jack Smith, What’s Underground About Marshmallows?.
Indeed, these performances were designed to operate on the mental and emotional level, as much of ancient ritual might have. In his discussion of experimental work like Smith’s, Richard Foreman attests, “I believe that a good number of the theatrical events presented at Mekas’s Cinemathèque pointed the way to a theater that can only marginally be realized at any historical time, a theater that functions as art functions, directly on the consciousness, and the way that consciousness operates, rather than a theater as illustrative psychology, mythology, or sociology.” The plays Smith presented were open for interpretation, not linear, narrative dramas. Their manifestation in performance was meant as a kind of ritual; in order for the ritual to be performed appropriately, the audience, like a congregation of worshippers, would need to take on roles and fulfill them per their leader’s wishes. The performance would not be a polished finished product. Rather, it would be play, literally: human beings playing at particular roles in the performance. They would be learning as they were doing; the performance would remain incomplete without their interaction.

The Ghost of Jack Smith: Ron Vawter in What’s Underground About Marshmallows?

Jack Smith, it seems, would be evoked as a ghost in later performances as well, most notably in the 1992 rendering of What’s Underground About Marshmallows performed by Ron Vawter as part of Jack Smith/Roy Cohn. As the DVD for the film of What’s Underground About Marshmallows? displays, “Quoting Ron Vawter, ‘A lot of people say that Jack only had about 12 ideas, but that they were the 12 most important

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ideas of the last 25 years.” If this statement is even remotely true, then the importance of Jack Smith lies not only in the works of art that he created but also in the legacy of his art works—what artists they inspired and what works were created based on them. Nowhere is the legacy of Smith more celebrated than in Vawter’s *What’s Underground About Marshmallows*, a filmed restaging of a Jack Smith piece. This was a version of a radio show, which in itself was based on the radio shows of Smith’s youth. There is a complexity of representational layers here, one of which is the blending of two of Smith’s artistic output media: performance art and film.

In this piece, performed live between 1986 and 1994, and then released as a home video in 1996, Vawter took on the role of Smith, both mimicking Smith in this role and trying to evoke him, without actually pretending to be him. The notes on the DVD attest that Vawter “was not interested in impersonation.” In this performance, we find no attempt at realism: Vawter puts on a fake voice and employs stylized movements. Despite this, the overall effect of the piece is, somehow, seemingly “real.” Although there is no attempt at theatrical reality, this comes across as a real fake performance (as opposed to a theatrical fake reality).

Consider this moment from Smith’s performance, as interpreted by Vawter. Vawter/Smith instructs the audience about acting; he declares, “one of the secrets of great acting is always to contrive to be chopping onions in some dramatic moment” (PAUSE) then “I think I’ll start the onion soup now” (pulls out onions) “now you can tell that this is one of the big moments of the play.” Ostensibly, this chopping of onions is to assist

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63 Ibid.
the actor in being able to cry on stage. And yet, this technique is at odds with any realist attempt at making an actor cry. In place of calling up a sad memory and letting that inspire tears or allowing the events of the drama to inspire those tears on their own, Vawter/Smith uses neither the actor’s “real” emotions from his self or the “fictional” emotions of the character in the circumstances. Rather, Vawter/Smith allows for an entirely external piece of business to inspire this moment of great emotional depth. Everything presented in a Smith work is a theatrical illusion, except that that theatrical trick has been laid bare for the audience to see its machinations.

As the DVD describes, Smith’s performances were the manifestations of a “sometimes raving, sometimes broken, paranoid, cross-dressing queer.” Smith is never not himself in these performances; in the Vawter interpretation, there is the sense that the personality of this new performer is present right alongside his evocation of the personage of Smith. A great deal of the action on stage involves Vawter/Smith interacting with bizarre stage properties while storytelling—there is no actual narrative drama being enacted on stage.

Rather, what is present is the representation of a type—not a specific character, per se, but a construct of Smith’s imagination. This personality is then filtered a second time through the lens of Vawter’s performance of Smith in the role. Because he was not interested in impersonation of Smith, Vawter’s character both is and is not Smith at the same time. The character being presented is styled in such a manner as to hearken back to Maria Montez’s Cobra Woman, without impersonating the femininity of that particular persona. Makeup is worn, but it is neither glamorous nor beautifying. Vawter appears

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64 Vawter, What’s Underground About Marshmallows?, DVD.
semi-Egyptian in style of dress, but the person being represented defies easy categorization, operating on as many varied levels as forms of media enveloped in this presentation.

In addition to the fact that the character is not a recognizable figure, the actor is going against the traditional styles of acting expected of a performer. Vawter/Smith laments, “worst of all, nobody thinks I’m acting, nobody thinks I’m a great actor or an actor at all, that this isn’t even acting.”65 The liner notes explaining this piece seem to echo this cry; Smith was “perform[ing] himself as himself”66 rather than embodying and presenting the personality of another, fictional human being. Who is this person on stage? It is hard to say. In both cases, the personality of the performer comes through as strongly, if not more strongly, than that of the character he is representing. The ghost of Jack Smith is everywhere in this production, as the ghost of Maria Montez was present in Smith’s productions. Ghosting as a practice is a key element of Ridiculous aesthetics, production techniques, and dramaturgy.

**Ghosting and Audience Construction**

Because of the presence of such pronounced practices of ghosting in the Ridiculous—to the point where productions, like those of Smith, could almost be seen as dream-like personal rituals—it becomes essential to consider audience construction. Plays like those put on by Smith were clearly not for the average theatregoer; that person would likely understand very little of what he or she was witnessing. Those who would enjoy a Ridiculous play would be those who understood the most references; i.e., cultural insiders to the particular culture that appealed to the Ridiculous artists. Audience

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65 Vawter, *What’s Underground About Marshmallows?*, DVD.
66 Ibid., emphasis mine
construction (and education) is key to understanding what makes the Ridiculous a movement in its own right. It is not just that these performances were stylistically similar; rather, it is that they speak in a similar manner to audiences who understand the “language” employed.

This Ridiculous language is an intertextual one, built of references that appeal to this particular subset of society: the audiences who would come to see these plays. Julie Kristeva notes in “Word, Dialogue, and Novel,” “an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.” Every text is created from text from other sources; meaning can be made both by understanding the product of this combination and by recognizing its sources. Ridiculous dramaturgy is merely an extreme version of this: Ridiculous play texts are constructs built from the mixing of various other sources. This intertextuality is what creates the landscape of the Ridiculous; being able to comprehend it is what makes one a citizen of the Ridiculous community.

Therefore, the practice of referencing outside source material in their plays is a way of meaning-making for this group of artists. The nature of the cultural elements they chose to include was unique to this group; they invoked certain cultural images, such as Maria Montez, and discarded or avoided others. For the Ridiculous, this practice was not casual; it was always linked to ghosting. As Marvin Carlson writes:

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Among all literary forms it is the drama preeminently that has always been centrally concerned not simply with the telling of stories but with the retelling of stories already known to its public. This process naturally involves but goes far beyond the recycling of references, tropes, even structural elements and patterns that intertextuality considers. It involves the dramatist in the presentation of a narrative that is haunted in almost every aspect—its names, its character relationships, the structure of its action, even small physical or linguistic details—by a specific previous narrative.\footnote{Marvin Carlson, \textit{The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine} (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 17.}

Here, Carlson is interested in drama as the main mode for this retelling and recycling to occur. Artists like Smith took this practice a step further, finding ways to evoke ghosts via the mediated, through his practices of “extended cinema,” which allowed the recorded to become part of the live performance experience. In addition, Smith was addicted to editing his filmed works time after time. Because of this, the ghosting that Carlson describes as happening during live performance is heightened; the literal ghosts of a past performance, one that was recorded, are able to exist side-by-side with the living, breathing performers. The use of media in pop performance highlights the subtle ghosting that always occurs during a live theatrical presentation.

For these artists, the nature of the ghosting was incredibly significant; the choices of references delineated the framework for this community. These people shared certain interests, worshipped certain icons—such as the great Ms. Montez—and avoided other tropes more commonly associated with mainstream theatrical production. In this way, the Ridiculous act of storytelling through performance could be seen as being akin to the
storytelling around the campfires of an ancient tribe; it reinforced shared cultural interests and strengthened community bonds and membership.

Indeed, this non-normative brand of theatre-making continues to have this connection to community identification. Of a later inheritor of the Ridiculous tradition, Taylor Mac, Sean F. Edgecomb writes, “In Mac’s case, he is the gay youth rejected by a normative culture and given up to the wilds of New York City, where he finds respite from homophobia through opportunities for the formation of community. In this context, Mac as fool found the opportunity to establish his own fool society, inviting audiences into his own queer space rather than entering the mainstream.”69 Like Mac, his Ridiculous predecessors created their own theatrical wonderlands—in some very non-traditional theatrical spaces—and allowed audiences to join in their spectacles. They created their own subculture as a safe space to make art—and live life—however they saw fit to do so.

This practice of building an insular audience community is very pronounced in the works of Jack Smith; he saw his late-night performances as only being for an elite audience who were both willing to wait as long as necessary to bare witness to the performance and who would understand the variety of references included in the production. Smith’s performances tapped into a shared experience, building a concept of a cultural memory and, ultimately, a community of sorts who, if they did not understand the work entirely, could at least appreciate it. Carlson elucidates shared memory as an important aspect of theatrical production; making a play is never just creating an

ephemeral performance. Rather, it is a way to archive a particular group’s identity at a particular historical moment. Carlson states:

Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustment and modifications as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.70

Ghosting of this sort occurred not only during Smith’s late-night loft performances but also during his expanded cinema works. In those productions, Smith built on the ghosted quality of live theatre by incorporating recorded elements into his performances; Vawter also evoked this by playing a cassette tape during his version of Smith’s *What’s Underground About Marshmallows?*. What these mediatized or expanded cinema performances allowed for was, as Warhol puts it, a “[combination of] cinema images and projectors with live actions and music.”71 This, then, allows for off-stage ghosts literally to participate in the live proceedings; Smith and other multimedia artists of his ilk who participated in events like Jonas Mekas’s Cinemathèque events, could construct an on-stage world with aesthetically fluid boundaries. In its own bizarre way, these Ridiculous performances acted as an archive of the cultural references that mattered to their participants and spectators, both in their incorporation of popular culture into the dramatic text and their use of filmed and recorded images and sounds. In highlighting

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shared interests, Ridiculous theatre participated in early acts of community building, especially among gay males living in downtown New York City in the 1960s and 70s.

Jack Smith wanted to go beyond speaking a shared cultural language in his interactions with his audiences; he actually wanted to bring his audience members into his performances in a direct and participatory way. His work creates a distinct bridge between what we might consider a Ridiculous aesthetic and the larger avant-garde and/or experimental scene within the theatre. In speaking generally of radical performance companies of the 1960s, James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal argue in *Restaging the Sixties* that part of the radical quality of performance from this period is a “rejection of theater’s traditional deference to the authority of the literary text and a rejection of the traditional boundaries separating performers and spectators.” In the works of Smith, this is as much the case as in any of the more obvious examples, like the performances of Richard Schechner or the Living Theatre. Smith’s performances were not designed in order to manifest a production of a written play text (as may be the case for Tavel or Ludlam). Rather, they were experiences meant to occur in the present tense for whoever decided to bear witness.

For those who stayed for the duration of the rites presented, a role might become available, as was the case for Stefan Brecht in the performance he describes in *Queer Theatre*. The audience member then had to become active performer, subjecting himself to direction from the artist in charge in order to make sure that the details were all precise so that the ritual was completed correctly. According to Brecht, Smith would often berate his participants until they got the actions right. The assertion of power on the part

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of the director was an integral part of Smith’s “make-it-as-you-go” aesthetic, and of the Ridiculous aesthetic more broadly. Brecht describes:

Much of his [Smith’s] time is spent directing his assistants who in fact tend to be the major performers. He is apt to get seriously irritated—is said sometimes to resort to physical violence (no act): people don’t seem to be able to follow the simplest instructions. … Also they have no (adequate) sense of responsibility— their responsibility being considerable because of the importance of the whole thing. They think it can be done any old way. Also his cooperants tend to confer with him about the proper next step.73

It is Smith’s concept for the production that must be fulfilled and done so correctly, per Smith’s vision alone. As Brecht notes, “All of Smith’s gestures are hesitant… He is figuring out how to do it while doing it.”74 Smith’s style of play-making is indicative of artistic practices found throughout the Ridiculous scene: an artistic genius pulling the strings of the night’s events, both inside the frame of performance and among the spectators.

The most compelling aspect of Smith’s performances—which do not quite stand up as dramatic literary texts nor seem simple to reconstruct on a modern-day stage—is the role that he prescribed to his audiences, implemented by breaking with the conventions of theatrical place and time. Clearly, as both Jonas Mekas and Richard Foreman will contend, an individual could be greatly changed by witnessing Smith’s works. Yet, despite the importance I am giving to the role of the audience for one of Smith’s loft extravaganzas, becoming such an audience member in the first place was a

73 Brecht, *Queer Theatre*, 16.
difficult endeavor, not because of a lack of economic capital, as is the case for many large-scale “uptown” productions, but simply from a lack of knowledge that a play was happening in the first place. In Judith Jerome’s Creating the World Waiting to Be Created, she notes, “The audiences for these shows varied in quantity; they were mostly, but not all, aficionados. You almost had to be in order to know that a show was taking place every Saturday night in a Greene Street loft. … Advertising was sparse and not straightforward or necessarily truthful.”75 One had to know how to navigate the few listings that did exist for these shows in order to attend them at all. Smith’s work was not affecting a great many of the “uninitiated”; rather, his productions principally were performed for an audience already well-versed in the nature of what they were about to see.

In Jerome’s estimation, lack of information about performances was not the only source for the complicated actor-audience relationship created by these sprawling midnight performances. Jerome lists some “tactics for… destruction/construction of his [Smith’s] audience”; these include: “delay and slowness requiring endurance of tedium; demands for participation; and direct abuse.”76 These productions were not for the casual theatergoer. Rather, they were for a particular community member, one who was willing to engage with the production: to tolerate its length and lack of focus, be willing to take part in the action, and possess an acceptance of potentially being insulted by its creator. Yet, Parnes remembers the audience participation as being a less “cruel” practice; “it wasn’t the kind of audience participation where you’re dragged on stage against your

75 Judith Jerome, Creating the World Waiting to Be Created: Jack Smith and D.W. Winnicott Performing Themselves (Ann Arbor, MI: ProQuest, 2007), 312.
76 Ibid.
will.” He suggests that only, “people who wanted to be in the show” actually performed.\footnote{Parnes, interview, October 8, 2013.}

Many of these spectator-performers were fellow artists, working on their own experimental theatre pieces. One such aficionado of the work of Smith, Richard Foreman, recalls, “It is a theater that nurtures, at all times, the dreams of those few young theater artists who are most insightful and exact in the ability to dredge up from the mind what the social beast has not found useful in its struggle to suppress the real evolution of consciousness and the spirit.”\footnote{Richard Foreman, “During the Second Half of the Sixties,” 26–27.} An artist like Foreman might have special insight into understanding the plays that Smith put on, as he, too, would go on to construct non-traditional, non-linear experimental theatre pieces.

And yet, for those willing to push through the tedium and possible cruelty of a Smith production, there was the possibility of the magic associated with great performance. I quote Jonas Mekas’s recollection of leaving a Smith performance at length, as his language evokes the affect of a Smith performance. Mekas gives a sense of how the ritual worked and what it left in the spectator afterwards, summing up the valence of Smith’s non-traditional theatrical productions. He recalls in “Jack Smith, or the End of Civilization”:

I began getting a feeling, it resembled more and more the final burial ceremonies, the final burial rites of the capitalist civilization, competitive civilization, these were the magic burial grounds and the burial rites of all the corruption, comfort and money and good living, and free gifts of the world that was now asleep, at 2 a.m., and Jack Smith was still alive, a madman, the high priest of the ironical
burial grounds, administering last services here alone and by himself, because really the seven or eight people who were now his audience (the other three were on the set) were really no audience at all, Jack didn’t need an audience, he would do it anyway, and I had a feeling that he did it anyway, many nights like this, many Saturdays, by himself, audience or no audience, actors or no actors, he reenacted this ceremony, the last man who was still around and above it all and not part of it but at the same time conscious of it all, very painfully conscious of it all, the sadness himself, the essence of sadness itself.\textsuperscript{79}

Anyone who was willing to sustain interest until the wee hours of the morning of a Smith production was rewarded with having seen something uniquely meaningful. Somehow, the nine-to-five commercial world was superseded for these few hours with something magical that only Smith could create for you (if, indeed, you were one of his worshippers). Smith and his work intentionally stood outside of the system of theatrical production because the intent behind the works was to be separated from the larger commercial system of production at work in the United States. Smith was, to use Stephen J. Bottoms’s classification, truly “underground”\textsuperscript{80}. He dismissed traditional agendas in order to explore his own existential questions.

\textbf{Smith as Political Artist}

Unlike much of the rest of the Downtown Scene, or much of the historical avant-garde, Smith’s work does not have a readily apparent relationship to the political. Yet,

for Parnes, “There was always a political content to his work for me.”\footnote{Parnes, interview, October 8, 2013.} Works like \textit{Rehearsal for the Destruction of Atlantis} do not have within them any specific political rallying cry or message. Unlike many of his downtown contemporaries, Smith was not creating didactic political theatre. Rather, he was experimenting with form and style, allowing this reimagining of theatre-making to be his radical stance. As Pogostin notes of Smith, “While Jack was an extremely political artist, the areas he dealt in were the ‘politics of art’ his endless struggle against the curatorial class that sought to mediate him and act as middleman between him and the general public.”\footnote{Pogostin transcript.} Smith tried to find his own methods with which to create art so as to differentiate himself from the mainstream; this act, above all others, was his main political action. This experimentation is evident in his usage of unconventional setting (a basic living space turned into a theatrical salon) and his emphasis on audience participation (i.e., that anyone who attended a production could be and probably needed to be a performer in his plays).

Because of his interest in audience engagement, Smith was an innovator in types of artistic presentation. He found ways to bridge the gap between filmed and live performance, as well as between fantasy and reality in his loft performances. As the introduction to \textit{Flaming Creature} notes:

He did, however, go on to develop an innovative technique called “expanded cinema,” which merged film and slide projection with live performance. … Spectators often had the feeling that what they saw enacted there was no more or less than Smith’s daily existence, framed by an audience’s presence. As with Smith’s films, his performances demanded that the audience allow itself to be
severed from the passive mode of observation to enter a performance that
challenged its reactions to, and assumptions about, art and theater.83

The radical quality of Smith’s productions was embedded in their ability to challenge
preexisting notions about the medium of art that he was employing and therefore about
culture and even life more broadly. Even though Smith did not use his productions to
enter into political debate with his audiences—or to instruct them about particular
political ideologies—Smith did challenge their notion about how art was supposed to be
made and presented. He questioned the idea that one’s home and one’s performance
space must be separate locations and he confronted his audiences with the possibility that
fantasy and reality can be two sides of the same coin through the act of performance. In
this way, Smith’s performances could have been as edifying for his audiences as their
more politicized contemporaries in the experimental Downtown Scene and as
provocative, in terms of form, as their historical predecessors in the interwar avant-
gardes.

Artists such as Smith were so far removed from mainstream culture that their
creations did not take the same explicit activist stance as some of their more outspoken
contemporaries. However, consider Naomi Fiegelson’s comments on the subject, as she
was investigating this “revolutionary” work as it was occurring and her notion of
“underground” art pairs well with Bottoms’s classification of the term. In Underground
Revolution, Fiegelson maintains that the “underground revolution is an avant-garde”
because “in trying to create a new culture, they are at least setting new styles.”84 In this

83 J. Hoberman, Flaming Creature, 2.
84 Naomi Fiegelson, Underground Revolution: Hippies, Yippies, and Others (New York:
Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 171.
way, as Fiegelson suggests, “the Underground revolution is a cultural rather than political one. While white revolutionaries have been criticized for not developing a political critique of the society, what they have developed is an alternative lifestyle. In the long term, this could be more significant.”\textsuperscript{85} This “alternative lifestyle” is inherently underground; it is entirely separate from mainstream society.

In addition, according to Fiegelson, within this Underground, there is an interest in participatory performance; she relates: “The Underground revolution has popularized the idea of participation, mostly through guerilla theatre, the Underground theater, where the reaction is part of the play….”\textsuperscript{86} How these artists chose to live their lives—and the constructs that they used for making their performances—were what was revolutionary about them, even if they were not didactically political.

In this manner, Smith’s use of non-traditional setting and duration for his performances could be considered his activist stance. In Time Binds, Elizabeth Freeman argues, “Queer temporalities… are points of resistance to this temporal order that, in turn, propose other possibilities for living in relation to indeterminately past, present, and future others: that is, of living historically.”\textsuperscript{87} Freeman’s notion that a refiguring of time can be a “point of resistance” creates a theoretical lens through which to view the bizarre all-night rituals that took place in Smith’s loft. Perhaps, then, a loft is not an odd site for performances but a “queer spatiality.” And perhaps these productions were not just bizarre exercises, but a new model for how a queer identity might be performed. These spaces became community sites for “raising the dead,” a place where the particular, if at

\textsuperscript{85} Fiegelson, Underground Revolution, 171.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 172.
\textsuperscript{87} Elizabeth Freeman, “Preface,” in Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xxii.
times peculiar, revered cultural ghosts could be brought to life, not just to be mourned, but also to invigorate the audience. These individuals shared similar cultural interests, and understood how to use art as a tool for constructing worlds in which their preoccupations were central. Ridiculous artists staged their version of what a performance could be, which reflected a new aesthetic perspective, one that had implications for new ways of viewing the world as well.

What Smith was attempting was, if not, political, then at least radical in terms of aesthetics. He was willing to abandon previously held norms for play duration or setting and disavow any sort of actor-audience divide in order to worship artists and objects that so many others would have rejected or disposed of. Andy Warhol, too, can be said to have engaged in similar practices in his Pop Art painting; he chose subject matter that many critics would not have considered “high culture” at the time and used techniques that broke with earlier models for “great art.” Therefore, these Pop Art works were not merely “art for art’s sake”; rather, they were productions that took up the task of remaking the cultural hierarchy per their own standards. Things usually considered insignificant or “low” could be valued as highly if not more so than icons traditionally held up as being of worth.

Smith did not enjoy such comparisons to Warhol as the one I made above. He saw his own work as the direct antithesis to what Warhol was doing, precisely because Warhol had given in to commercial pressures. As Pogostin remembers:

He saw Warhol another artist from the working classes as one who had succumbed to “landlordism” as a user and was appalled. He hated the idea that Warhol had “borrowed” Jack’s idea of flaming creatures as the model for
warhol’s [sic] “superstars.” When I tried to comfort Jack with the idea that he had influenced Warhol and others he replied, “I didn’t want to influence them, it’s not a good thing that I influenced them. I never intended to create a race of prostitute drag queens.” and “Warhol makes objects of people that have no way of using that objectification.” He believed that it was he who had been used, his work and ideas stolen.  

Smith’s ghosting of Warhol therefore also runs reciprocally; Warhol may have learned a great deal from Smith, but Smith would forever be ghosted by the impact of Warhol on the artistic scene of the twentieth century. In the process, Smith believed that he saw his ideas put into a context that was directly opposed to the one that he proffered; instead of being part of an underground, anti-commercial artistic scene, Warhol would use these techniques as commodities to be bought and sold, in exchange for fame and fortune.

The Ridiculous and Pop Art shared both a literal, geographic scene and certain aesthetic elements. However, works by Warhol and those by artists who surrounded him, indeed even those associated with him, were often created with different motivations than his own. Clearly, Warhol was interested in becoming a commercial success and he fashioned himself into one. To Smith, Warhol’s work lacked the kind of depth necessary to be meaningful. Smith saw Warhol’s work as too disengaged, due to its interest in consumerism. I quote Smith’s commentary on Warhol at length:

They’re all hypnotized by the blandness… the smoothness of the finish.

Critically you can’t deal with Warhol any more than you can deal with the plaster.

… What Warhol uses is icing instead of plaster … and the sparkle on top of the

88 Pogostin, transcript.
icing is amphetamine. There’s nothing underneath. He himself has been terribly bruised by commercialism. He’s the product of unarrested commercial intrusion into our daily lives. His films are not much different from all the plaster that’s showing on 42nd Street. His main contribution lies in the truth of his sound track which underlies the phony nature of the commercial movie. But there’s still nothing underneath. And yet, in the long run he may be doing something good for the medium.  

Smith recognizes that the issue with Warhol and his artistic creations, no matter how popular or significant they may have become, is that they are too tainted by commercial culture.

Ridiculous Theatre & Pop Art

Indeed, much of what has contemporarily come to be understood as Pop Art has its genesis in Smith’s works. And Smith knew he was making an important contribution. Pogostin recalls, “Very competitive, often mean spirited, Jack Smith was very aware of his place in the history of art and his contributions. He hated comparisons to other living artists seeing himself instead as their source.”  

On the one hand, this exposes Smith’s own egotism; he believed that the artistic contributions of others were derivative of his own work. In addition, though, it exposes just how dangerous inspiring a movement can be. Often one can see one’s best ideas co-opted—or even improved—and thus a fellow artist can overtake one on an idea that was not his or hers to begin with. For Smith, this

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90 Pogostin, transcript.
usurpation was precisely what happened. Warhol took many ideas from Smith’s work and then went on to become more famous for them.

Smith, like Ludlam, did not work in a vacuum, nor was he the only artist at this time to do the kind of experimenting that he was doing, particularly with film, nor the only one to worship Maria Montez. For Jack Smith, ghosting runs two ways: his performances were ghosted by Montez, but the larger Pop Art scene, even its most famous practitioner, Andy Warhol, were ghosted by Smith. For example, Bottoms states, “Both … directors [Warhol and Jack Smith] sought, in different ways, to make film more ‘real’ precisely by making it more obviously ‘fake’—believing that the distinct personal qualities of their performers would become more immediately apparent if they were engaged in the construction of blatantly tacky, artificial ‘illusions.’” These filmmakers were more interested in presenting the personalities of their performers than in studying particular characters or character types. Reality, in these works, is achieved through a precise fiction; there is no conceit that the world of the performance is a slice of life. Instead, these productions were self-consciously performed, as much to bring attention to the personality of the performer as to the character he or she was portraying.

To some degree, Pop Art, as an aesthetic, achieves the same result as the Ridiculous: an abandonment of traditionally held norms of “high” and “low” or “good” and “bad.” As Susan Sontag argues, “The best works among those that are called pop art intend, precisely, that we abandon the old task of always approving or disapproving of what is depicted in art—or, by extension, experienced in life.” In this sense, the

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91 Bottoms, Playing Underground, 216.
Ridiculous is a form of Pop Art because its practitioners consistently rejected the notion that some content is worthy of being celebrated while other work should be scorned. Although this is not the only way to understand Pop Art as a form of artistic creation, it does serve to link what the Ridiculous artists were doing with the larger Pop Art scene from which it was born.

This sort of work demands a new theoretical framework if one wishes to study it; the former standards of “high” and “low” art, such as those that might have been useful for someone like Clement Greenberg in the 1930s, could no longer apply in the Downtown Scene, which came to life in the 1960s. This is due to the unique nature of art production in this historical period. Mark C. Carnes suggests, “The 1960s, then, did not entail the demise of criticism; rather, the decade ushered in a new group of critics and focused their attention on a new set of artistic problems.”93 The debate now, in Carnes’s view, was not whether a particular work should be considered high or low. Rather, “the arrival on the scene of pop art, as well as the success of avant-garde experimental films such as Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures*, blurred the lines between elite and popular culture. At the same time, pop art questioned the very status and function of the trained eye of the critic in determining truth in representation, thus opening the door to a theoretical flowering.”94 Even though, as Arnold Aronson claims, East Village theatre of the period may not have been “theoretically based nor intended to transform the idea of

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94 Ibid.
these Pop Art works made great strides in undoing previously held notions of high and low in art.

Because of its disinterest in traditionally held norms of high and low culture, the Ridiculous can be viewed as having been a logical outgrowth of Pop Art artistic production. For many critics, the connection between the Pop Art coming out of the Factory and the Theatre of the Ridiculous is a linear, cause-to-effect one. Especially significant to the development of the Ridiculous, as a style of theatre-making, was Pop Art cinema, at least according to Bottoms. Bottoms asserts, “Although firmly rooted in the make-it-up-as-you-go trash aesthetic that had been a feature of the off-off-Broadway movement from its inception, the Ridiculous owed its genesis to New York’s underground film community, and particularly to the work of Jack Smith and Andy Warhol.”

Their emphasis on popular culture as the subject for art as well as their preoccupation with elevating the everyday—such as Warhol’s soup cans or Smith’s naming a character “Noxzema,” a popular skin cleanser brand name—were at the heart of what made both Pop Art and the Ridiculous distinct from other experimental art forms. Like some avant-garde theatrical experimentation of the past, the interest here was in “art-for-art’s-sake,” creating a performance, no matter how amateurish, for the sake of performing.

In this instance, Bottoms is including Smith among the Pop artists, not the Ridiculous artists, and highlighting him, along with Warhol, as a key influence on the

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Ridiculous. In truth, Smith was a source even for Warhol; Warhol was influenced by Jack Smith’s work. Director Robert Wilson goes so far as to suggest, “Warhol couldn’t have made the films that he did without having known Jack.”98 In the case of Andy Warhol, then, ghosting is clearly present; his work was always marked by what he borrowed from the artists with whom he collaborated;99 this ghosting is nowhere more pronounced than it is in Warhol’s connection to Smith.

Warhol would credit Smith as an influence on his own way of dealing with “actors.” Warhol writes, “I picked something up from him for my own movies—the way he used anyone who happened to be around that day, and also how he just kept shooting until the actors got bored.”100 Smith was not bound by a traditional filming schedule, nor did he care if his performers were “actors” or not; Warhol used this technique and became famous for turning no-names into superstars.101 This practice, of course, was its own sort of Ridiculous remix: individuals who would not have otherwise been considered “talented” or “artists” were given the opportunity to participate in and contribute to artistic production. Standards for artistic ability are unnecessary when anything can be art and anyone can be an artist.

98 Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis documentary
99 For my purposes, I am only concerning myself with his connection to Jack Smith, but Victor Bockris, for one, claims that “One of the key points of Andy’s character was his ability to share his life with whoever he spent time with. There was an openness towards others that let them feel as if they were doing something equally with him and were in a sense part of him” (Warhol: The Biography, Da Capo Press, 2009: 98). In a sense, those who worked with Warhol felt as though they were a part of him and had contributed to who he would become. Some felt good about this connection; others, like Smith, felt abused by it.
100 Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, POPism: The Warhol Sixties (New York: Penguin Adult, 2007), 32.
101 Performers like Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn would be referred to as Warhol Superstars.
Thus, it is significant that Warhol’s claim to fame—Pop Art—was heavily derived from practices Warhol witnessed Smith engaging in before he began his most prolific Factory production. In 1964, Warhol filmed Smith filming “Normal Love,” a meta action that now seems a metaphor for how Warhol took from Smith’s art work to create the style of filmmaking that would later be associated almost exclusively with Warhol alone. By becoming much more famous than Smith, Warhol erased almost all “traces” of Smith, except through his ghosted presence in Warhol’s own works.

Quotation in Pop Art Theatre

Pop Art may have borrowed a great deal from the Ridiculous; ghosting seems to run both ways between these two forms. As Marvin Carlson describes it, textual ghosting or “this ‘intertextual’ attitude, approaching the text not as a unique and essentially self-contained structure but as an open-ended ‘tissue of quotations,’ has become now quite familiar.” And yet, it is still striking in its Ridiculous incarnation. Consider the works of Factory Superstar Jackie Curtis; the ghosting in these pieces, as in many Play-House productions or Jack Smith presentations, is always of the icons of popular culture, engaging the audience in a game of “name that reference” from one line to the next.

Curtis is an interesting figure to consider because she, too, straddles the line between Pop Art and the Ridiculous, as Smith does. The nature of the works by both artists implies a gray, overlapping area between the two movements. One clear similarity is the interest in popular culture—and its mixing with higher forms of art—as well as celebrity worship. Curtis certainly occupied a similar space in terms of aesthetic choices to the one employed by the Ridiculous artists; she, too, created plays constructed from

102 Carlson, The Haunted Stage, 4–5.
elements of all aspects of culture, with a particular emphasis on a worship of movie icons.

One Curtis play that achieves the goal of rousing the ghosts of the glamour of old Hollywood is *Glamour, Glory, and Gold* (1967). I am singling out this play in particular because of its central storyline: a starlet’s preoccupation with Hollywood glamour and fame. In terms of nostalgia for twentieth-century popular culture, this play exhibits its own special brand of that middlebrow phenomenon. According to Craig Highberger, who chronicles Curtis’s life and career in the anecdotal biography *Superstar in a Housedress*, “The play is very derivative of old movies, but is at times both a satire and a tribute.” Curtis’s representation of the mythologized “Golden Age of Hollywood” both reveres and pokes fun at it. In classic Ridiculous fashion, Curtis explores the tension between making art and being a star.

Curtis engages in the same practice of quoting from other sources and referencing the mainstream culture that both Ludlam and Smith did. Consider this anecdote from Andrew Amic-Angelo: “In those days, they broadcast two episodes of *I Love Lucy* every afternoon, and this was Jackie’s favorite show, so the rehearsals would be set according to the schedule of the *I Love Lucy* show. And during my key scene as Arnie, we actually wrote a line into the script: ‘Look at you. You are such a pig! All you do all day long is sit around on your ass watching *I Love Lucy*.’” Like other plays of the Ridiculous, Curtis’s plays include elements that betray a love, bordering on obsession, with popular culture from the creator. In this anecdote, two layers of ghosting become evident: the

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104 Ibid.
text is ghosted by both the cultural reference and the “inside joke” about the rehearsal process. A Ridiculous play is always somehow more complex than merely a sum of its component parts.

Curtis’s play is entirely ghosted by its creator’s interest in the Hollywood culture of her youth. However, in a play like *Glamour, Glory, Gold*, the interest in popular culture goes beyond merely trying to reference it or quote from it. Rather, these Pop Art plays attempt to bring to life the old Hollywood starlets on stage. Again, nowhere was this fixation on popular culture more evident than in the Ridiculous theatre artists’ preoccupation with B-movie starlet Maria Montez. Vaccaro saw the connection between the work his company was doing and the plays of Curtis in terms of this star worship. Vaccaro states, “Jackie Curtis was completely in tune with what we were doing at the Play-House of the Ridiculous. We were really into the movies of the thirties and forties. That’s where our sensibility came from. We were especially crazy about the terrible old films of Maria Montez.”

As we have seen, Montez was perhaps the deepest influence on the aesthetic of the Ridiculous, more so than any other artifact of twentieth-century culture. Her “ghost” is always present on stage, sometimes literally, as Ridiculous performers were regularly preoccupied with evoking the spirit of Montez in all of the art that they created. Here, she is present in a work by a Pop Artist, suggesting again that the line between these two forms is inherently blurry.

In the next chapter, I look specifically at Vaccaro’s company, as much of its collection of artists—and aesthetic style—was born directly of Andy Warhol’s Factory. Ronald Tavel, who was an associate of Jack Smith, got his start writing scenarios for

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105 Highberger, *Superstar in a Housedress*, 94.
Warhol, some of which Vaccaro directed. From the practice of writing and performing scenarios for Warhol, Ridiculous Theatre, as an actual named practice, genre, and company would literally come to life. Therefore, without Warhol’s Pop Art scene, there might not have been a specific Theatre of the Ridiculous at all. The link is not only through ghosting, but a literal, tangible one between and among gay male artists who were interested in performance and a particular mode of expression. These individuals did not accept the status quo; rather, they used their art to revalue all aspects of culture. Through Vaccaro’s company, that will come to be known as the Play-House of the Ridiculous, ghosting is taken one step further to the level of remix, where anything and everything that is said and done could be seen to evoke something else.
Chapter Three

“Ridiculous Remix”: Playing at Power at The Play-House of the Ridiculous

One thing that made the performance art pieces of Jack Smith so remarkable was the blending of ideas and iconography from all strata of culture. Yes, Smith made many references to B-movies and the like, but he also had intellectual concerns, which he explored in his productions. In his essay “Love Is An Object,” curator of the Whitney exhibit “Rituals of Rented Island” Jay Sanders argues that works like those by Smith and other artists of his ilk “occupied the boundaries between popular entertainment and intellectual inquiry.”¹ Indeed, the crossroads between that which is consumed for pleasure and that which is presented for intellectual debate is a key element of the Ridiculous landscape.

Despite the presence of these key aesthetic elements, the works of Jack Smith were never called Ridiculous by their creator or by their spectators. Smith’s connection with Andy Warhol and Pop Art, however, is key to fleshing out the trajectory of the Ridiculous landscape. The threads of the Ridiculous have their genesis in the realm of Pop Art; this is made literal through the development of John Vaccaro’s Play-House of the Ridiculous. Vaccaro, born in 1929 in Steubenville, Ohio, might never have made Ridiculous Theatre if working for Warhol had not brought him and playwright Ronald Tavel, born in Brooklyn, New York in 1936, together to stage Warhol’s at times esoteric, or even incomprehensible, film scenarios. I concentrate on the Play-House as a focal

point for the Ridiculous because it was here that the word “Ridiculous” was first applied to any production by artists in the downtown scene.

Throughout the productions of the Play-House, there is an emphasis on citationality, or what I would like to brand “Ridiculous remix,” for purposes of this chapter. I am applying the contemporary concept of remix to these performances of the 1960s–1980s, despite the fact that the term did not come into common parlance until the 1990s. Remix, as it is theorized by individuals such as Lawrence Lessig and Lev Manovich, includes practices of borrowing or quoting from, alluding to, and sampling from works from the surrounding culture. In our era, “remix culture” allows “any grade-school kid [who] has a copy of Photoshop … [to] download a picture of George Bush and manipulate his face how they want and send it to their friends,” according to Lessig.² But the Ridiculous artists engaged in similar practices decades prior, mixing their pop cultural interests with their knowledge of erudite material. The difference was that the products of Ridiculous remixers were live performances as opposed to mediatized Internet properties.

In general, I base my discussion of remix on the works of music theorists; the musical application of remix is closest to the Ridiculous practice of it. As DJ Spooky puts it, “This is a world where all meaning has been untethered from the ground of its origins and all signposts point to a road that you make up as you travel through the text.”³ In order to make sense of a Ridiculous play, one needs to trace the various threads present in the text, adding them together to get the complete picture. My discussion of

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remix refers to the works of musical remix scholars Eduardo Navas and Simon Langford.

In addition, I apply the discussion of middlebrow cultural mixing in David Savran’s *A Queer Sort of Materialism* to these remix practices in order to assess their valence as cultural tools. In terms of theatre scholarship, I build my understanding of Ridiculous dramaturgy on the works of Stephen J. Bottoms, Bonnie Marranca, and Stefan Brecht, all of whom directly engage the Theatre of the Ridiculous in their work.

Ridiculous remix can take three forms. The first emphasizes a renegotiation of cultural power, where low cultural artifacts are valued equal to or even more than those from the highbrow or elite strata of cultural production. Ronald Tavel’s play *The Life of Lady Godiva* exhibits this remix style of cultural blending. Kenneth Bernard’s *The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico* displays a second strand of Ridiculous remix; in this play, remix techniques are used in order to blur the lines between reality and fiction within the stage world. This creates a complex metatheatricality, performance self-aware of its own status as performance. This metatheatrical move is a postmodern one; as Linda Hutcheon states in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, postmodernism “takes the form of self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining statement. It is rather like saying something whilst at the same time putting inverted commas around what is being said.”

In this sense, a metatheatrical play consistently draws attention to itself in order to comment on it itself. The apotheosis of Ridiculous remix is Charles Ludlam’s *Conquest of the Universe or When Queens Collide*, which is simultaneously a mashup of cultural materials, both the highbrow and lowbrow variety, as well as an exercise in extreme metatheatricality. Remix may have taken different forms, but it was always a part of

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Ridiculous play-making. Of course, gender also seems to be “remixed” in Ridiculous productions; I take this issue up in the following chapter on Ethyl Eichelberger.

In each of these plays, a cultural mixing in the dramaturgical structure highlights a subtle thematic motif: that of power. In the Ridiculous, remix is used in order to undo existing power structures as they relate to culture; the low can now be seen as high and vice versa. Form in the Ridiculous is able to throw into relief content, and a political undercurrent emerges. These seemingly apolitical plays—as they address no particular social or political issues nor serve any didactic or activist purpose—actually engage large questions about the possession of power: who has it, why do they have it, and how might it be taken away. One way in which power may be asserted, from the Ridiculous perspective, is through an undoing of the cultural hierarchy, both that which asserts high culture over low as well as that which privileges the educated over the uneducated. Even the hierarchy of wealthy over poor is undone in a Ridiculous production; these plays are not commodities to be sold for profit but experiences that cannot be quantified in dollars and cents. The Ridiculous undermines such hierarchies through its use of remix techniques in its dramaturgy.

Playing at the Play-House

Stephen J. Bottoms has already documented the history of off-off-Broadway theatre and the Play-House in great detail in his Playing Underground, so I will not recapitulate that entire history here. But, to give a brief overview of the Play-House’s history would be impossible without first recognizing the larger scene of experimental theatrical production in which the company was formed. Bottoms and others have labeled this scene “off-off-Broadway,” both because of its geographical distance from the
Great White Way and its disavowal of the sorts of commercial productions being mounted on Broadway. Bottoms reminds that “the term off-off-Broadway needs to be considered skeptically,” especially in discussions that attempt to suggest it was a cohesive movement. Bottoms is sure, however, that among these companies, of which he considers the Play-House a key example, “there was… a very clear sense of shared community, and a shared resistance to the economic imperatives of mainstream American culture.”

Zeroing in, then, on the Play-House specifically, this so-called repertory company principally consisted of director John Vaccaro and whatever playwright and actors he was working with at a particular time. Although much has been made about the overlap between the Ridiculous and Pop Art, aesthetically, “Vaccaro points back to the Caffe Cino as the inspirational starting point for such queer performance work.” The inception of the Play-House began in the collaboration of Vaccaro with playwright Ronald Tavel, producing plays that often featured other “Downtown superstars,” particularly those from Andy Warhol’s Factory. Productions such as Conquest of the Universe featured performers more commonly associated with the Factory. Tavel initially wrote scenarios for Warhol and “some writers attribute the beginning of the Theatre (or Play-House) of the Ridiculous to the staging of Tavel’s second production, The Life of Lady Godiva in April 1966.”

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6 Ibid., 7.
By 1967, the troupe was traveling to India to perform Tavel’s *Indira Gandhi’s Daring Device*. Play-House productions were mounted throughout Greenwich Village, from the Coda Galleries to St. Mark’s Playhouse, throughout the late-1960s. More than a theatre-making site, the Ridiculous was a kind of lifestyle, a company rather than a venue. The notion of “house” in Play-House could be viewed in the manner that Judith Butler approaches the concept in her essay “Gender is Burning,” included in *Bodies that Matter*. In this piece, Butler studies the film *Paris is Burning* (1991), directed by Jennie Livingston, addressing the ways in which the film presents “the kinship system, replete with ‘houses,’ ‘mothers,’ and ‘children,’ that sustains the drag ball scene and is itself organized by it.”

A similar construction could be applied to the Ridiculous: this company, though not having ownership over any particular space, created a place to play, just by bringing artists together.

The site of performance—wherever the Play-House managed to stage their productions—could function in a similar manner to the drag balls depicted in Livingston’s film. Butler discussed bell hooks’s take on the film, which suggests that “the pageantry represents a life of pleasurable fantasy, and the lives outside the drag ball are the painful ‘reality’ that the pageantry seeks phantasmatically to overcome.”

The Ridiculous also provided sites for those involved to come together, to be whoever they were, and to enjoy the pleasures of performing, separate from the possible oppression of the outside world.

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9 Ibid., 136.
Much of what Stefan Brecht saw as progressive within the Ridiculous is due to its lifestyle production, not its artistic work. Brecht describes, “Essentially I think this theatre proposes a certain ideal life-style or attitude, doing theatre as part of living that way, which it conveys by its style on stage and which it defends in its plays by ridiculeing its opposite and in no other way because that life-style is rigorously indefensible.”10 The nature of Ridiculous work, in Brecht’s understanding of it, came from a larger concept of how to live one’s life, and from building a larger society in which this art form is a vital component. On some level, the Ridiculous was a way of life, not just a theatre company.

In addition, Brecht emphasizes the sense of a family structure inherent in the manner in which the company worked. Brecht notes how this is a family of individuals who have chosen to be members of the group and who therefore play their roles (both on stage and off) as a part of their larger identity as members of the community.11 What Butler says of the world of Paris is Burning could also be said of the landscape of the Ridiculous: “What becomes clear in the enumeration of the kinship system that surrounds the ball is not only that the ‘houses’ and the ‘mothers’ and the ‘children’ sustain the ball, but that the ball is itself an occasion for the building of a set of kinship relations that manage and sustain those who belong in the houses in the face of dislocation, poverty, homelessness.”12 The Play-House of the Ridiculous, in bringing these artists together and allowing them to perform these chaotic plays, was also giving its constituent performers a place to belong.

10 Stefan Brecht, Queer Theatre (Germany: Suhrkamp, 1978), 30.
11 Ibid., 31.
12 Butler, “Gender is Burning,” 137.
Despite the Play-House being more of a company than a place, and the importance of the notion of ensembles for Ridiculous community building, the Play-House repertory players would not be consistent across time. By the 1970s, even the idea of the company would shift, as Vaccaro began principally collaborating with playwright Kenneth Bernard and having plays mounted at La MaMa. Even without Tavel, the company still maintained the Ridiculous moniker. More than anywhere else, the Play-House of the Ridiculous rested with director Vaccaro and was manifested within his performance style.

To navigate through the larger landscape of the Ridiculous, then, it is useful to start with the Play-House of the Ridiculous, once housed on Seventeenth Street in Manhattan, because it was here that the term Ridiculous was first applied to a production. There are elements of the Play-House’s history that center around the process of titling their work “Ridiculous”; these seeming anecdotes actually shed light on the struggle to define that term in artistic practice.

Therefore, much of my concern is semantic. In his article written exclusively about Ronald Tavel, Dan Isaac claims that “at the Coda Galleries, on June 29, 1965,” due to a meeting between Tavel and director John Vaccaro, “the theatre of the ridiculous was born.” However, the term “Ridiculous” would not be used to describe a production until the following year. The ad for 1965’s Shower and The Life of Juanita Castro does not include any mention of the word Ridiculous, neither in the company’s name nor in any descriptive passage. The program for The Life of Lady Godiva, on the other hand, includes both the title of the company (the Play-House of the Ridiculous Repertory Club)

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as well as the following statement from Ronald Tavel, “We have passed beyond the absurd: our position is absolutely preposterous.” With this production, the company was setting out Ridiculous as both their label and style while Tavel was attempting to define how he intended to apply the term “Ridiculous” to his work.

What’s in a name, one might ask? If a connection is to be drawn between the Ridiculous and other twentieth-century avant-garde movements, then titling a movement is critical to its formation. Many movements of the avant-garde proclaimed their objectives in manifestos, even before any works of art had been created. These manifestos, thereby, operated as declarations of what their movements’ titles meant. This act of declaring was, in and of itself, the birth of these artistic styles and associations. Mary Ann Caws suggests, “The manifest proclamation itself marks a moment, whose trace it leaves as a post-event commemoration. Often the event is exactly its own announcement and nothing more, in this Modernist/Postmodernist genre. What it announces is itself.” The existence of a particular artistic community, then, can be created in the moment the group declares that it exists. Declaring one’s existence can be the entirety of the movement; as Caws reminds, “the artistic manifesto, whose work will be carried on in another world altogether—aesthetic battles having different consequences [from theological or political ones]—depends on its context as well as its

15 Mary Ann Caws, “The Poetics of the Manifesto: Nowness and Newness,” in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, edited by Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xx. Emphasis in original. Interestingly, the only artist associated with the Ridiculous to create a manifesto was Charles Ludlam. His manifesto, entitled “Scourge of Human Folly” is both a how-to guide for creating a Ridiculous play and a mockery of the practice of creating a manifesto simultaneously.
cleverness, and on the talents of its producer.” Calling the movement Ridiculous was a critical step in bringing the movement into being; actually having a movement would be entirely dependent on what sort of work these artists would go on to create.

In terms of the avant-garde, then, the project of the Ridiculous, as Ronald Tavel conceived it, is most closely in dialogue with the Theatre of the Absurd. Tavel envisioned that the Ridiculous that he was creating was a direct reaction—or indeed counterargument—to the Absurd. To take Tavel’s opinion of the genesis of the Ridiculous, “[he himself] invented the designation Theatre of The Ridiculous to identify the vision and styles of what would be … his more than forty produced stage plays.”

Tavel’s intention was to create something beyond what the Absurd had been able to accomplish in their theatre; “[Tavel] asked himself, ‘What could come next? A theatre of The Ridiculous?’” Supposedly, Tavel was consciously writing a style of play that was meant to react to, and perhaps even commentate on, the genre of the Absurd.

Yet, the Absurd was never a conscious movement in its own right, unlike the avant-gardes who declared their existence via manifesto. Several playwrights, including Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Eugene Ionesco, wrote plays independently of one another, yet have been forever linked by the analytical work of critic Martin Esslin. By grouping these plays together and calling them Absurdist, Esslin created a theatrical movement that had not been there before. So, too, did Vaccaro and Tavel’s flyer indicating that a Ridiculous production by a Play-House of the Ridiculous company

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18 Ibid.
declare that now a new movement was about to begin: one that was no longer absurd, but now ridiculous.

My aim here is not to “create” a movement entitled the Ridiculous. Rather, I am interested in outlining the possibility of such a movement, as, unlike the Absurdists, many of the artists covered in each of these chapters explicitly used the term Ridiculous to define their work. Certainly, then, the Play-House becomes a crucial juncture with which to begin one’s journey; this is where the debate over the meaning of Ridiculous began. And this debate offers us a trail to follow in uncovering the history of these companies.

If Tavel’s story is not the complete account of how all of the artists came to refer to their work as Ridiculous, then how did this title come in to common usage? Bottoms relates the following anecdote in *Playing Underground*; as legend would have it, the term “Ridiculous” was created entirely inadvertently. “Though Tavel claims that he originated the company name, Vaccaro insists the label ridiculous was coined by his friend, actress Yvette Hawkins, in describing a rehearsal of *Shower.*” In either of the cases, the Ridiculous, as a signifier of genre, was first applied to productions from this particular company. If the latter explanation is correct, then the Ridiculous, as a theatrical movement, was not only not a specific reaction to the Absurd; it was not even a conscious construct. The Ridiculous was, in appropriately ridiculous fashion, created by accident. The style (if we may call the Ridiculous a style of theatre-making) developed from the theatrical practices being employed at the Play-House.

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However, the dramatic and theatrical style of early Ridiculous works at the Play-House is as much about anti-art as it is about making art. For example, for the scenario *The Life of Juanita Castro*, penned by Tavel for Andy Warhol’s Factory players, the stage direction appears: “This play should never be rehearsed.”\(^\text{20}\) The emphasis here was on the act of performing, not a polished finished product. As Stefan Brecht describes in *Queer Theatre*, the audience is “seeing an activity as such—a doing, perhaps a making—rather than the doing or making of something. We are not so much seeing a play as the making of a play.”\(^\text{21}\) The potential amateurish quality that this would lend to the production would become a stylistic marker throughout many of the works associated with the Ridiculous.

Therefore, in addition to borrowing material from a large-scale cultural reserve of ideas, Ridiculous plays also indulge an interest in spontaneity in performance. In no Ridiculous theatre is this more prevalent than in productions at director John Vaccaro’s Play-House of the Ridiculous. An interest in improvisation and the fluidity of theatrical presentation became a quintessential aspect of Vaccaro’s directing style. Bottoms describes:

Vaccaro began to see the potential in treating theatre not as a tightly rehearsed edifice, but as an opportunity for “live” improvisation around certain structural parameters (i.e., the script). The Ridiculous subsequently developed as a kind of latter-day commedia dell’arte company, whose rehearsal process was directed not toward arriving at a single, ideal performance to be consistently reproduced, but toward drilling performers in a scenario’s improvisational possibilities. The

\(^{20}\) Note to Tavel’s play, qtd. in Bottoms, *Playing Underground*, 220.  
\(^{21}\) Brecht, *Queer Theatre*, 42.
challenge for performers was to find a way to spark off each other’s individual styles and personalities, so that the show could evolve spontaneously—moment by moment and night after night.\textsuperscript{22}

These plays were meant to be new and unique at each performance, never the same twice. There was no final, definitive production; the work was always in flux.

The plays, therefore, exhibited an anarchic, free form approach to artistic creation.\textsuperscript{23} Artists associated with the Play-House were interested in discovering new ways to make theatre while, at the same time, altering conceptions of the divide between low and high in the arts. Bottoms writes, “By the early 1960s, moreover, the need to throw off traditional conceptions of high and low art, respectable and despised, was being felt even by those with more self-conscious artistic agendas.”\textsuperscript{24} The Ridiculous, like other companies operating in the Downtown Scene at the time, was interested in undoing the outdated categories of high and low in their theatre. Ridiculous artists took their own personal interest in things like twentieth-century cinema and mixed it with more traditionally canonic material, such as works of classic literature and myth.

Before lumping the Play-House and other Ridiculous sites in with any and all other companies that mix various cultural elements, however, it is worthwhile to highlight what makes it unique. As Arnold Aronson suggests in \textit{American Avant-Garde Theatre}, “one branch” of avant-garde theatre of the 1960s “was the formalist work to be found in performance art and the creations of Jack Smith, Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, and others that was informed by Happenings, Cagean aesthetics and influences

\textsuperscript{22} Bottoms, \textit{Playing Underground}, 222.

\textsuperscript{23} This is not to suggest that playwriting and the creation of play texts was not a goal of other artists associated with the Ridiculous, most notably Charles Ludlam.

\textsuperscript{24} Bottoms, \textit{Playing Underground}, 35.
from other arts.”25 On the one hand, the Ridiculous was participating in this gesture toward art for arts’ sake—a return to an almost Dadaist performance sensibility. Yet, on the other, Ridiculous plays were neither “abstract,” which George Rickey considers “abstracted from nature” nor “non-objective,” in Rickey’s terms “subjectless art.”26 Rather, they appropriated from the culture around them, shook up the various pieces, and poured them out into their own particular production. The final product that emerged was a mixture of American culture, which in itself is a mixture; these productions were unique because of their blended form. I call this particular style of appropriation and reconfiguration of cultural elements Ridiculous remix.

Middlebrow America: Setting the Stage for Ridiculous Remix

The elements being remixed, in the case of the Ridiculous, were borrowed from all aspects of culture. It was precisely an interest in popular culture that made the Ridiculous so pertinent to its historical place and time. As Bonnie Marranca suggests in the introduction to Theatre of the Ridiculous, “Its [Ridiculous theatre’s] dependency on the icons, artifacts, and entertainments of mass culture in America—the ‘stars,’ old movies, popular songs, television and advertising—makes the Ridiculous a truly indigenous American approach to making theatre.”27 Building on Marranca’s analysis of the Ridiculous, I suggest that this style of remixing those elements also contributes to the Ridiculous being seen as an important American artistic movement.

Branding the Ridiculous as American sheds light on its preoccupation with commercial advertising, consumer products, and popular culture elements. David Savran notes in *A Queer Sort of Materialism*, “By February 1949, middlebrow’s moment had arrived” in the United States, heralding in an age that included such varied cultural creations, “from teen movies to abstract expressionism, from bebop to *Queen for a Day*, from ‘Hound Dog’ to *The Sound of Music*.” Therefore, the world of many of the Ridiculous artists’ adolescence, as most were born in the 1930s and 40s, would have been the world of “the post-World War II boom years… [which were] filled with institutionalized bowling leagues and paid vacations and brought television, long-playing records, and paperback books into almost every American home.”

Savran labels this explosion of popular culture “middlebrow,” theorizing about the contentious space between “highbrow” art that “refus[ed] commodity status and [functioned] as a signifier of cultural purity, consecration, and asceticism during a period marked by the widespread and unprecedented availability of luxury goods, both utilitarian and decorative” and the “lowbrow,” “whose taste was almost always associated with a fraction—or perhaps I should say a fantasy—of the working class, the primitivized ‘masses’ who were usually seen as dupes, or potential dupes, for those most un-American of ideologies, communism and fascism.” From the elitist highbrow standpoint, the lowbrow was considered too common, designed for too uneducated a strata of the populace, to be worthy of the consideration of cultural critics. The lowbrow

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29 Ibid., 3.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 4–5.
32 Ibid., 5.
was also in conflict with the “American way” of Capitalism, yet the highbrow was often celebrated for its distance from the commercial concerns of marketability and profitability. The complex and contentious crossroads between commercialism and aesthetics would remain at the heart of debates over cultural hierarchy throughout the twentieth century.

Indeed, cultural critics of the mid-twentieth century were interested in differentiating between what was considered high and what low. For example, Clement Greenberg positioned the avant-garde against the kitsch, discussing the avant-garde as a movement outside of mainstream culture in which “‘Art for art’s sake’ and ‘pure poetry’ appear, and the subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.”33 Form is valued above all else in the avant-garde, yet it is being invaded by “academicism and commercialism” which “can mean only one thing: that the avant-garde is becoming unsure of the audience it depends on—the rich and the cultivated.”34 This has lead the avant-garde to become less confrontational and therefore to lose some of its important cultural status. That status is entirely dependent upon its separatist position, yet that outsider status is reliant on financial support from the upper class.

Kitsch, on the other hand, “is a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy,”35 according to Greenberg. Kitsch is built on “debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture”36 and is principally preoccupied with being

34 Ibid., 4.
35 Ibid., 5.
36 Ibid.
bought and sold. There is nothing genuine about kitsch; it is the lowest of the low, a
terrible byproduct of the capitalist system.

Kitsch also serves a function in memory-making, both melancholic and nostalgic, per Celeste Olalquiaga’s categories. She notes that an item may not have intrinsic value, but it can be imbued with value by its owner. In this way, “Melancholic kitsch revels in memories because their feeling of loss nurtures its underlying rootlessness.” Because kitsch has no value, it can intensify feelings of sadness and longing. On the other hand, “Nostalgic kitsch evokes memories in order to dispel any such feelings, stubbornly hanging on to any inkling of the past that may provide it with a sense of continuity and belonging—that is, with a tradition.”37 Here, the value of kitsch is its ability to evoke the past, a clear preoccupation for these very nostalgic Ridiculous remixers.

Certainly, the Ridiculous could be called kitsch because of its preoccupation with nostalgia. And yet, the Ridiculous cannot be said to fit easily into either one of Greenberg’s categories. On the one hand, the Ridiculous is kitsch, as it is preoccupied with some of the most disposable elements of American culture and intended for a commercial audience. It is also “low” in terms of content, often relying on crude humor or sexual situations for a laugh. On the other, the Ridiculous could be said to be an “art-for-art’s-sake” movement and thereby potentially avant-garde and highbrow. Shower, Tavel’s early scenario for Warhol, is an example of this blending of the seemingly dichotomous high and low. Tavel observes, “[Shower] was dirty like the Mae West I had loved for so many years, it was action-packed and streamlined for movement, yet totally

devoid of character or identity, direction, plot, or subject matter.”  

Shower, then, could be said to be both a product of the highbrow, avant-garde project of valuing form above content while at the same time being manifested from the bawdy, popular forms of kitschy low culture that Tavel had come to admire.

Because of this integration of high and low into a single finished product, as in the case of Shower, the term “middlebrow” is apt for discussing Ridiculous work, especially because of its ties to commercial commodity culture. Savran distinguishes the middlebrow from its upper and lower companions, stating, “the middlebrow is the unapologetic consumer and cultural middleman.”

The Ridiculous, despite an ostensible aestheticist mentality of artistic creation, cannot be said entirely to eschew an interest in the commercial; these artists were obsessed with the icons of the cinema and cited quotations from commercial advertising. The Ridiculous, certainly, was willing to consume anything and everything from the surrounding culture, repurposing all of that material into its finished products. References to the popular were no less employable than citations from the elite.

The valence of this culture blending suggests an undoing of the cultural hierarchies, which had been so popular in the preceding decades of the twentieth century. The high and low, in the Ridiculous, have equal usefulness in terms of being used as the matter from which to make art. In this way, even if the Ridiculous artists were not the authorities on culture—indeed much of their work went unnoticed—they enacted power over the culture around them within the plays that they created. As Michael Kammen

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39 Savran, Queer Sort of Materialism, 6.
mentions in *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the 20th Century*,

“Cultural authority may also embody or manifest cultural power; but authority and power are not exactly the same, and it has not been commonplace for the two qualities to be combined. Cultural power involves the production, promotion, and dissemination of cultural artifacts.”[^40] The Ridiculous artists set their own standards for what was “valuable” and what worthy of being discarded. In this manner, the Ridiculous, as a movement, was preoccupied with power—power over the culture in which they worked and the power to highlight to their audiences what was worthy of being mocked (which, ultimately, turned out to be everything).

This undoing of preconceived notions about cultural hierarchies was not unique to the Ridiculous alone. In this particular period, throughout the Downtown Scene—the larger landscape of artistic production in New York City in which the Ridiculous found itself situated, usually considered to be concentrated below Fourteenth Street—“a distinctly new attitude toward artistic production surfaced.”[^41] This new attitude was particularly preoccupied with “undermin[ing] from within the traditional structures of artistic media and the culture that had grown up around them.”[^42] Rather than overturning the system that was in place, these artists were interested in working from inside of that system, destroying it from its interior with its own elements of production. There is no clear manifesto for the Downtown Scene; as Brandon Stosuy rightly recognizes, mapping

[^42]: Ibid., 21.
this scene “prove[s] only so helpful.” Rather, what connects these works (in his study, of literature) together is that they “not only served as an alternative to mainstream publishing.” Rather, the Downtown Scene “presented writers with a shadowy shifting, often ad hoc blueprint of how to create works that breathed freely and remained connected significantly to the everyday.” There was no single way to create a so-called “Downtown work of art.” These artists positioned themselves outside of mainstream culture and thus the power to create rested in the hands of the artist, who reflected on the everyday world in which he or she lived.

This landscape of artistic experimentation questioned the status quo of the surrounding culture. In order to do so, the artists associated with the movement employed many of the same artistic concepts and ideas. The Downtown Scene, and by extension, the Ridiculous, can be analyzed based on certain key elements that run throughout the artwork produced. Marvin J. Taylor sets out four themes as well as a “tendency” that appear to be present across all of the works in the Downtown Scene—and indeed, their traces are evident in the works of the Ridiculous as well. These are: “authenticity,” which addresses questions regarding originals and their reproduction(s); “performativity,” a preoccupation with the meanings and boundaries of performance; “politics,” particularly those of an activist quality; “accreditation,” which “investigates the processes by which cultural power is created, maintained, and distributed”; and the

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44 Ibid.
“tendency,” which Taylor labels “subversion.” Building on Robert Siegle’s argument in *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency* (1989), Taylor explains this tendency through an example: “As Siegle notes, Downtown artists appropriated existing cultural models, such as business structures, only to use those models to disrupt the hegemony of business, for example.” Mainstream structures were employed so that these artists could undermine them from within.

If we link the Ridiculous to the surrounding community of experimental artistic practice, then these discussions of subversion, and by extension, of power—or even politics—become essential to the conversation. It is easy to call the Ridiculous, particularly its Play-House incarnation, an apolitical art movement; Vaccaro was preoccupied with exploring art and experimentation, specifically improvisation, in theatre, not with presenting didactic political lessons. Tavel, however, was interested in moving beyond the Absurd, a nihilistic, fatalistic, minimalist movement at heart. Could his gesture toward this more baroque, over-the-top, anarchic dramaturgy have been a reaction to the resignation of Absurdism? Could that have been, in and of itself, if not an activist stance, then perhaps a politicized gesture?

Should the Ridiculous be considered an avant-garde movement to any degree, then discussions of politics are critical to understanding the meaning of the movement. The debate over whether or not the avant-garde was principally aesthetic or actually political in nature has been bandied about in avant-garde studies for years. In *Anarchist*

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46 Ibid.
for example, Allan Antliff dismisses the apolitical ization of the avant-garde in America, debunking “three pervasive myths codified by Barbara Haskell in the Whitney Museum’s benchmark end-of-the-century exhibition catalog, *The American Century: Art and Culture, 1900–1950.*” These so-called myths seem oddly apropos to my discussion of the Ridiculous: (1) “early American modernism is best defined stylistically, according to degrees of abstraction”; (2) “early American modernism was an exercise in formalist innovation”; (3) “American modernists were quietist and apolitical.” Antliff puts re-politicizing the first wave of the American avant-garde at the base of his discussion of their artwork. No longer are these formalist movements, principally preoccupied with changing the nature of artistic expression. Rather, they are the products of artists deeply engaged with the issues of their time.

I, too, “debunk” these myths, insofar as they apply to the plays of the Ridiculous. In terms of Ridiculous plays, then, I suggest that they were not principally apolitical plays, nor was their form meant to be more significant than their content. Rather, the form was used precisely to mirror the content: the practice of Ridiculous remixing allows these plays to tackle the concept of power. This meant the blending of high culture and low culture was a politicized action—the form of these plays, as Taylor and others have suggested was the heart of the “Downtown Scene project,” subverted the already existing systems of cultural power.

In order to understand how the Ridiculous remixed materials in their plays and thereby gain understanding of the potential valence of that practice, I look at three key

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48 Ibid., 2.
plays that were produced by the Play-House of the Ridiculous: *The Life of Lady Godiva* by Ronald Tavel, originally produced in 1966 under John Vaccaro’s direction at the Seventeenth Street Studio; Kenneth Bernard’s 1973 *The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico*, a Play-House of the Ridiculous production directed by Vaccaro for LaMama; and 1967’s *Conquest of the Universe or When Queens Collide*, the impetus for the split between its director, Vaccaro, and its playwright, Charles Ludlam. In each case, complex middlebrow tension is derived from the blending of interests in both commerce and art. Artistic power is not clearly situated with either the elite aestheticians or the commercial sell-outs. Rather, in the Ridiculous, those who are able to wield power seem to be those who operate from somewhere in between these two poles.

**Ridiculous Remix I: Blending the High with the Low (*Life of Lady Godiva*)**

Before discussing the use of remixed elements, it is worth remembering that *The Life of Lady Godiva* was part of the bill that first employed the term Ridiculous to advertise what audiences were about see. The style of this production would be the first practical evidence of what was meant by a Ridiculous production. Bottoms does extensive work outlining the history of the Play-House in the ninth chapter of *Playing Underground*. Of this play, Bottoms writes, “Premiering in April 1966, this was the first presentation at the new Play-House of the Ridiculous—a large, rectangular loft at 12 West Seventeenth Street.”49 The space, a “former parlor room” had a limit on audience capacity, as it was on the second-floor; yet, legal constraints hardly stopped the Play-House from its work. Bottoms relates that “Tavel claims that the designation ‘Play-

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House,’ with its disarming hyphen, was chosen as a means to sidestep the licensing implications of having a ‘theater’ or ‘playhouse.’”\(^{50}\)

The play, famous for including Charles Ludlam’s first role, was also recognized as a triumph in its own right. Michael Smith notes “this is a real play, solidly constructed and intelligently written.”\(^{51}\) In addition, later Ridiculous Theatrical Company contributor Everett Quinton suggests that this play was a subtle commentary on the 1950s and the House Un-American Activities Committee. He sees in this play, as well as the Ridiculous more broadly, “a reaction to the oppression of the 1950s.”\(^{52}\) Although these plays may seem like humorous romps, there may be a much more meaningful theme hidden behind the laugh-out-loud façade.

Despite the fact that this company may have been “‘playing’ at theatre” (as Bottoms suggests), the play that they presented, even if under the title of Ridiculous, was coherent. Of the three plays that I discuss here, Lady Godiva is the most tightly plotted. Yet, even though Tavel wrote a clear and specific story, this production was still subject to Vaccaro’s interest in improvisation; by playing one of the roles and therefore always being on stage, Vaccaro provided “himself the opportunity to bark commands and improvise on the spot.”\(^{53}\)

*The Life of Lady Godiva* uses a classic style of remixing, taking an old idea or theme and adding new material to it in order to create an original finished product.

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\(^{50}\) Bottoms, *Playing Underground*, 224.


\(^{52}\) Everett Quinton, interview with the author, February 27, 2014, via telephone 2–3 p.m.

Commonly, remixing is thought of as practices of taking preexisting songs and altering them in some way: for example, taking the lyrics from a song and setting it to a different melody or backbeat. Simon Langford’s *The Remix Manual* sets out some key distinctions between musical pastiche methods and his categories are useful for discussing the Ridiculous. According to Langford, remix is only one style of musical montage; to distinguish a remix from a mashup, for example, “A mashup is a mix or edit of two (sometimes more) other songs to create a new one. Most often mashups contain little or no actual music added by whoever created them.” So Ridiculous plays cannot be considered to be mashups, as they do contain some (at times, a great deal of) original content.

In the case of music, in contemporary remix, the trend is to move away from just reorganizing or reorchestrating elements from the original piece of music. Instead, “the remixers of the late 1980s and early 1990s were using less and less of the original instrumentation in their remixes and using more newly created musical parts.” This style of remix—according to Simon Langford, the type of remix most commonly used in music today—lines up with the style of play-making the Ridiculous artists used. They took elements of existing work, the plot line from a classical story or drama, perhaps, and dropped in brand new artistic elements.

*The Life of Lady Godiva* uses this basic remix structure: it takes as its basis a classic story and adds original content to it. The play operates as a loose, metatheatrical adaptation of the story of Lady Godiva; from the show’s first line, the players make it

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55 Ibid.
56 See intro to Langford’s book for more on the variations of remix in musical construction.
known that they are aware that they are performing for an audience. Mother Superviva (John Vaccaro in drag as a nun) opens the play by stating, “You will discover that from this point on, every line is better than the next.”

Most of the play then adheres to this arrangement of quotational one-upsmanship. As opposed to advancing a plot, each line seems to build on the last as though in a comedy routine. There are puns, jokes, and witticisms from all of the characters and very little of the dialogue acts to further the simplistic plot, a dramaturgical structure common among plays of the Ridiculous. The familiar story of Lady Godiva is being created anew by the addition of all of these linguistic elements; the remix occurs when these plays on words are layered into the already existing narrative structure of the story. In this version, everyone knows what Godiva’s fate will be: to ride naked through the town. The only action, then, is to get her to fulfill this destiny.

In the original Godiva story, as, according to Robert Lacey, it was written down in the early thirteenth century by Roger of Wendover, Lady Godiva performs this sensational task out of charity. The chronicler writes:

Longing to free the town of Coventry from the oppression of a heavy tax, Lady Godiva begged her husband with urgent prayers, for the sake of Jesus and his mother Mary, that he would free the town from the toll, and from all other heavy burdens. … She would not stop pestering her husband, until he finally gave her this reply. “Mount your horse, and ride naked before all the people, through the

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57 Ronald Tavel, The Life of Lady Godiva in The Theatre of the Ridiculous, edited by Bonnie Marranca and Gautum Dasgupta (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1979), 15. All subsequent references from the play will be noted parenthetically.
market of the town, from one end to the other, and on your return you shall have your request.”

It is then that she disrobes, cloaks herself with her hair, and completes the mission. Consequently, the taxes were lifted.

In Tavel’s version, too, Godiva wishes to free the town from financial burden. Godiva cries out, “O, beneficent Leofric, good and rich, Earl of Mercia and most merciful, movable Master of Castle Coventry and O worshipful Ward of Warwickshire, O remit the heavy duty that thou hast laid upon the peasantrie [sic] in the hereabouts, that thereby relieved they might come hither to this house and further relieve themselves. Do thou this in remembrance of thine own lecheries. We four supplicate thee, then, for this” (30). This line brilliantly manifests Ridiculous remix; it is at once both a highbrow construction and a lowbrow dirty joke. The heightened language suggests a highbrow work of theatre, like Shakespeare, in which the poetry of the language is as valued as the plot itself. Yet, the double entendre of “relieve themselves,” which can imply both rest and using a restroom, suggests a simple-minded entertainment for the uneducated masses, a lowbrow phenomenon. The fact that these two elements are combined together in order to create the text of the play is exactly how the Ridiculous works; the low and the high are blended together to create a comic effect. This comic effect—laughing at the incongruity—gives the audience an opportunity to question exactly what is so incongruous in the construction.

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59 Lacey, Great Tales from English History, 63–64.
Levity, of course, is what wins out in this version of the tale, not sincerity. When Godiva makes this plea, the others realize in what story they have found themselves and explain to Godiva what her sacrifice must be in order to free the town:

LEOFRIC: Ah, Godiva. Lady Godiva. Then it is clear, my child, what you must do. And my duty is clear too, the demand I must make is clear. For all this was written in the mind of God and thereafter inscribed in the history books long before either of us was born. And all these things I re-rehearse in you that that which happens in the future may be closer to you.
TOM: Go on and tell her already.
LEOFRIC: Lady Godiva:—you must
THOROLD: Ride through the market place of Coventry
VERONICAS: At high noon
TOM: On the back of this old horse
SUPERVIVA: Stark naked! (31)

In this version, the narrative has already been written; now that the characters have discovered themselves within this particular tale, their main mission is to play out the story’s key events.

In this light, Tavel’s play could be seen as a parody; as Eva Gruber notes, “[parody] does not necessarily concern itself with the extratextual reality [of the story]; and… it proceeds by transforming rather than just exposing its subject matter.” Tavel is not only recounting the legend of Lady Godiva; he is reimagining that tale through his use of remix. What is created from his careful blending of silly puns and pop culture references into this classic tale—the outcome of this Ridiculous remixing—has the capacity of parody to “involve imitation plus humor or mockery.” Ridiculous remixing exposes what is laughable not only in the added quips and cultural sampling, but also in the original source material.

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61 Ibid.
Therefore, once the characters recognize their own status as characters in the Lady Godiva fable, the gravitas of the tale is lifted. Godiva is not fearful of being nude in public. Rather, her reason for not wishing to fulfill her fate is a fairly preposterous one; Godiva states, “But, good Earl, how can I possibly ride through the marketplace of Coventry at high noon on the bare back of that old horse when I’m stark naked? I have hemorrhoids.” Leofric then asks, “Do they hurt?” to which Godiva replies, in true Ridiculous fashion, “No; but they photograph dreadfully” (31). In this play, we find a classic story being travestied—a bawdy version of an otherwise respected cultural tale of a woman doing whatever it takes to help her fellow citizens. Every moment is played for laughs.

By making this story into a joke, Tavel subtly implies that the power of the story is being undone, particularly its moral component. The audience is forced to recognize their own role as spectators; as Bottoms argues, “it is the audience’s voyeurism that is manipulated, as the implied promise of Godiva’s nudity is used to taunt the salaciousness of anyone expecting a rerun of Shower.” By contrast, the original legend celebrates the goodness of Lady Godiva, and by the seventeenth century, the story invoked the morality of the citizenry as well. Lacey describes, “According to the seventeenth-century version, the medieval villagers had shown their solidarity with Godiva’s protest by staying indoors on the day of her ride, with their shutters decently closed so that she could pass by unobserved.” This story became so popular by this period that “an account of 1678 describes a Godiva procession that attracted tens of thousands of visitors.”

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62 Bottoms, Playing Underground, 225.
63 Lacey, Great Tales from English History, 65.
64 Ibid.
version would only be the most recent of many retellings and even reenactments of this mythic event, an event that historically had allowed an entire community to celebrate its own strong moral fiber. This time, however, the audience might be forced to confront quite the opposite: its own lecherous desire and potential immorality.

Because of this Ridiculous remixing, this tale of morality, in Tavel’s reimagining, turns into a playground for lewd jokes and obscene gestures. All of the anachronistic references being made—the twentieth-century popular culture allusions thrown in—undo the moral imperative of the original story. In its place, we find characters that engage in grotesque acts, but only do so for the audience’s pleasure. We find a Godiva who “wanted to be a Playboy bunny” (24) and a Mother Superior who claims, “We was having Oedipus sex, sonny and me was” (32). The most notable, and classically Ridiculous, stage business is the action of this version’s Peeping Tom (portrayed by soon-to-be Ridiculous superstar, Charles Ludlam). Tom is guilty of looking upon Godiva’s nakedness, but only because it was his fate as the “peeping” character in this tale. He proclaims, “I am Tom, the Peeping Tom. The Peeping Tom of history, if you please. A voyeur, to you” (48). Watching Godiva is merely his role in the drama; he has no choice in the matter and therefore cannot be held accountable for his actions.

Yet Tom is no innocent in this tale. In fact, his activity is lewd before he ever even encounters Miss Godiva. The stage directions describe that when something goes “wrong with the mechanism of the horse. TOM has trouble with the brake and pedal. He dismounts and examines for the trouble in the horse’s mouth, in its rear end, and notably its pendant sex which he cranks like a jack” (20). Indeed, it is Tom’s relationship with the horse that is his most physical; later “TOM writhes on the floor by the horse as if
being ravished” (40). Secretly staring at Godvia will be one of the least scandalous things this Tom has done. The whole idea of virtue that is celebrated in the original is thrown into question in this version.

In terms of the idea of the Ridiculous as a style of theatrical remix, it is also important to pinpoint the references used in this play. I would like to highlight two key references: a riff on a popular advertising slogan on page 28 and a reference to Shakespeare on page 40. After a self-referential jab at the possibility of “bearded ladies” among the group, Superviva is handed a phial from Thorold, who tells her, “Here, have some Ban, Mother, it takes the worry out of being so close” (28). This phrase, which references a popular deodorant brand, includes a slogan that had been a part of the advertising campaign for that product since 1960. Consider this against the mention of Shakespeare. Unlike the importance that seems to come through from the advertisement tagline, Shakespeare comes across as being useless in the world of this play. Leofric dismisses the Bard, crying, “Shakespeare?!—he belongs to the ages” (40). Shakespeare is no longer relevant to the world of this play; he is dated, out-of-touch with the times.

What might be the valence of a play that chooses to mix a reference to a television commercial with an allusion to the oft-considered greatest playwright who ever lived, especially when it appears to put more value on the former than the latter? In my estimation, Ridiculous remix, in Tavel’s play, is precisely the kind of subversive undoing of pre-existing structures that Taylor and others have celebrated as being iconic of the countercultural Downtown Scene. The low is being valued and the elite is being

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devalued; at the same time, in this play, the norms of traditional morality are being mocked and turned on their head. Certainly, these elements suggest a subversive quality within the play, one designed to throw into question and even contradict contemporary standards for cultural power.

_The Life of Lady Godiva_, subtitled “an hysterical drama” is an example of the middlebrow remix of elements that I described as being a key marker of a Ridiculous work. As Marranca states, “The play takes as its starting point the eleventh-century legendary figure, and in a structure that parodies Medieval and Elizabethan literary convention, cowboy and B-movies, Tavel brings together references to television, the _New York Post_, the Rockettes, Franz Liszt and Art Nouveau in one campy, anachronistic whole.”66 This play is orchestrated chaos, a display of the controlled anarchy that can emerge when you mix unlike materials together into the same dramatic structure.

The source of meaning in this play, then, is not the story itself, but how the story is presented. And this is a presentation totally preoccupied with itself—it demands its viewer be a “peeping Tom” on all of its preposterous behavior. In so doing, it shines a light on a very particular aspect of cultural production in this period: a complex blurring of the lines between moral and immoral and between high and low art, a confusion between what is meant to be culturally meaningful and what is meant to be avoided or discarded.

As Marranca states in the introduction to _Theatre of the Ridiculous_, _The Life of Lady Godiva_ is a key example of one style of Ridiculous plays. She writes, “Lady Godiva is the campy, kitsch side of the Ridiculous. Not only does it illustrate the

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Ridiculous’s grounding in popular culture… but even more important, its dependence on performance to realize itself. *The Life of Lady Godiva* is art about artifice.” Despite the fact that Marranca uses “campy” and “kitsch” almost as synonyms here, there is an important distinction between the two terms. For Matei Calinescu, “Lovers of kitsch may look for prestige—or the enjoyable illusion of prestige—but their pleasure does not stop there. What constitutes the essence of kitsch is probably its open-ended indeterminacy, its vague ‘hallucinatory’ power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy ‘catharsis.’” In a sense, kitsch aspires to be valuable, while lacking any actual value; it indulges in the pleasures of achieving something of worth without actually having done so. “Camp,” on the other hand, “cultivates bad taste—usually the bad taste of yesterday—as a form of superior refinement.” Even in her theorizing about the Ridiculous, Marranca finds herself trapped within a Ridiculous remix: a blend of a disavowal of real value for the escapism of illusory value with an absolute indulgence in that which is known to have no value. Indeed, Tavel’s Ridiculous play remixes a classic legend, imbuing it with iconic Ridiculous content, like cross-dressing, quotation from all aspects of popular culture, and a great deal of commedia-style *lazzi* on stage. *Lady Godiva* is a play about its own status as a performance; Kenneth Bernard’s *The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico* takes this metatheatrical quality of the Ridiculous to an even deeper, more troubling, level.

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69 Ibid., 230.
Ridiculous Remix II: Blending the Real World with the Fictional World on Stage

(*The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico*)

*The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico* considerably post-dates the other two plays discussed in this chapter. Whereas both *The Life of Lady Godiva* and *Conquest of the Universe* were both produced in the tumultuous late 1960s, *The Magic Show* came later, in the equally complex early 1970s. In terms of the development of the Play-House of the Ridiculous, this was also a new time; no longer was the company situated in an apartment on the second floor of a building on Seventeenth Street. Now it was performing at Ellen Stewart’s iconic La MaMa Repertory Theatre, as a resident company no less.70

As I am interested in the concept of space as it relates to the Ridiculous, this move further downtown is worth noting. Originally, as Bottoms describes, the Downtown Scene favored playwrights; it gave writers a chance to get their plays seen and heard, with little or no preoccupation about success or fame. However, by the end of the 1960s, “the delicate balance of power of writers and directors had shifted to the point where the latter tended to enjoy more creative autonomy.”71 Issues of power were negotiated even among the companies and their associated artists; now the Downtown Scene and even the Ridiculous began to have artistic power hierarchies of their own that needed to be contended with in order to get work produced. Playwright Bernard was only able to have his plays produced at La MaMa because of his “collaborative partnership” with director Vaccaro.72

70 Bottoms, *Playing Underground*, 323.
71 Ibid., 322.
72 Ibid., 323.
The addition of Kenneth Bernard to the Play-House family allowed Vaccaro to take Play-House productions in a new, previously unexplored, direction. Like some of Jack Smith’s Ridiculous performance art pieces, Bernard’s plays explore the nightmarish quality embedded in fantasies of pleasure. The two both “shared… a similarly dark, apocalyptic worldview” which is perhaps best explored in Bernard’s 1973 play *The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico*. Like other plays by Bernard, such as *The Moke Eater* (1968) and *Night Club* (1970), *The Magic Show*, “demanded an overtly theatrical treatment in production.”

Bottoms is isolating what I call the “metatheatrical” quality of remix in this play. Not only is Bernard mixing elements of the surrounding culture into his drama; in addition, he is blurring the lines between the real world and the staged fiction. The play is always a performance within a performance, one that may have strong implications for the audience’s perception of what is meant by reality outside of the theatrical frame.

Remix takes a different form in Bernard’s play from how it was used in Tavel’s; Bernard is less interested in mixing high and low culture in order to expose the ways in which the high is as open to being mocked as the low is. Rather, *The Magic Show* mixes various narrative threads into the fictional realm of the magic show. The performers for these scenes appear to emerge from the audience, the scenes they must perform seemingly conjured “by magic.” If this is the case, it is up to the spectator to establish what is real within the fictional world (i.e., what is happening for the characters portrayed) versus what is an illusion meant to trick the participants and spectators alike.

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Remix in Bernard’s play not only pokes fun at its source material; it also muddies the distinctions between the performative and the real. Bernard “blends not only cultural styles but also cultural judgments” as Chris Barker argues in *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* was the intention of “‘Raging Fred,’ a mashup of the highly esteemed Scorcese film *Raging Bull* with the pop culture TV show *The Flintstones.*” Barker links this “blurring of boundaries” with postmodernism, which “is marked by a self-conscious intertextuality.” So, too, is Bernard’s play—except in *The Magic Show*, the texts being woven together are not merely disparate source material; rather they are the reality of violence and the seeming safety of the fiction of the stage world. A very disturbing aspect of real world human nature is thrown into relief through its representation via multiple performative layers (for example, a scene within the scene of the magic show narrated by Dr. Ma-Gico).

Indeed, this reflection of the problems of the real world through the ugliness of the staged one is something *Village Voice* critic Michael Smith celebrated about this bizarre play. Smith contemplates, “Kenneth Bernard’s new play ‘The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico’ is a shocking vision of evil. … Yet it’s no grosser than reality, we are meant to see, for the play and the production have a malicious elegance and cold-blooded viciousness that must be taken as passionately moral in order to be tolerated.” Again, we see the theme of morality being bandied about in the so-called Ridiculous world; the concepts of morality are viewed from a skewed perspective in these Ridiculous plays—in

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75 Ibid.  
this case, through the kaleidoscope lens of a metatheatrically remixed dramaturgy—so that the audience might reconsider what is meant by morals in the first place.

Bernard’s play operates as a complex play-within-a-play, generated from the space of performance itself. After a lengthy description of the scene at the play’s opening, which includes “fanfare,” “a seventeenth-century drawing room,” and “audience [sitting] in chairs on three sides, the first row left vacant for the gentlemen and ladies of the court,” Ma-Gico announces, “Ladies and gentlemen, this show begins and ends with a dance.” The actors are aware that they are playing roles and are assuming the personas required by the play. At the same time, however, they can also drop these identities and join the audience. This performance is entirely preoccupied with its own status as theatre; it is metatheatrical, as much about the performance itself as it is about the actions of the play.

Telling the plot of The Magic Show would be a difficult task. Rather than advancing a particular narrative thread, the play is more a study of a particular dark psyche, exploring the violent visions conjured by its narrator. Bernard’s plays expose and explore the darker side of the Ridiculous, not only reveling in the grotesque but also pushing the limits of how much violence can be represented on stage. In this play, we witness both magic and murder, seeing what dangers can lurk behind the curtains of a Ridiculous performance. Marranca describes, “The grotesque side of the Ridiculous is reflected in Kenneth Bernard’s The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico. Set in a seventeenth-century drawing room bordered by mirrors, the play is a series of episodes orchestrated

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77 Kenneth Bernard, The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico, in Theatre of the Ridiculous, edited by Gautum Dasgupta and Bonnie Marranca (New York: Performing Arts Journal, 1979; play originally published, 1972), 109. All subsequent references from the play will be noted parenthetically.
by the magician Ma-Gico for the ‘enlightenment’ of his audience (in the play and in the theatre).”

In the case of Bernard, our Ridiculous entertainment is meant to expose some darker, obscured truth.

Since the tone of this play is so different from that of other Ridiculous works, remixing in Bernard’s play must take a different form than in Tavel’s. In *The Magic Show* culture is being recycled (which happens to a lesser degree here than in *Lady Godiva*), but, more importantly, two levels of performance are being interwoven in this play. Unlike Tavel’s characters, who were aware they were in a play and playing for an audience, Bernard’s magician narrator can both direct the action happening around him and interact with it. In this way, something unique is created from the material being used; this is no ordinary magic show.

In terms of remix, then, a cultural artifact is created that is unstable; it is more than just a play made up of bits and pieces of other aspects of culture. It is something new entirely: a performance of a performance meant to have implications for the audience’s understanding of reality. Eduardo Navas contends, “Remix affects culture in ways that go beyond the basic understanding of recombining material to create something different. For this reason, my concern is with Remix as a cultural variable that is able to move and inform art, music, and media in ways not always obvious as discussed in remix culture.” By remixing metatheatrically, Bernard exposes the ways in which the real world could be a performative fiction and how fiction is no stranger than real life. *The Magic Show* created from this remix is very discomfitting, even in its ridiculousness.

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As a cultural variable, here remix is able to allow performance to question reality and vice versa. Dr. Ma-Gico instructs, “Ladies and gentleman, we come now to the first sequence. Or episode. There will be several of these, and you must look for a theme, continuity. But not too hard or you might miss it entirely. For example, we have a lot of kings. Perhaps you should make something of that” (110). By recognizing that this is a performance for spectators, Dr. Ma-Gico is able to give the audience a task to complete. He highlights the presence of rulers throughout the play, noting that they may be important to the audience’s understanding of the meaning of the play, which, of course, they are.

This performance does not exist only for its own sake; rather, its use of remix allows it to force its spectators to grapple with important themes, in this case, related to the wielding of power. As the show’s grand finale, the king, “as every night… will be assassinated” (131). Yet, despite having his throat cut, the king will regain his throne at the next performance; the things that happen on stage are not real and therefore have no consequences. These fictions reflect a hidden truth about the loss and gain of power in the real world; for every ruler who is unseated, another will come to take his place. There is no escaping from power; someone will always rise to wield power over others.

Like Tavel’s play, the dramaturgy of The Magic Show includes a blending of elements, but Bernard’s style takes a different form from Tavel’s earlier work. In this play, the references remain elevated and highbrow (at one point a Verlaine poem is included in the original French), as opposed to being placed alongside low cultural references. Instead, these elite cultural citations are paired with reenactments of scenes of extreme violence, which are all masked in a form of popular entertainment: that of the
magic show. On one level, all of the severity and seriousness of this production is undercut by the fact that the audience knows that they are watching “a magician” (114), albeit one who claims he is “not a prestidigitator” and does “not deal in tricks” (115). By calling this a magic show, Bernard is pointing to the fact that this is an act of illusion meant to entertain its spectators.

As in Lady Godiva, we find the presentation of a type of lazzzi, but the onstage clowning takes on a more threatening guise in this performance. Most notable are Ma-Gico’s instructions to the King, directing him to perform a nearly impossible task in which “he must rise, and as he rises transfer both symbols of his power to one arm, so that with the other he may sweep up his robe, step forward, and, without stopping, bend and pick up the book. He must do this in a continuous, graceful, kinglike motion, without losing his crown, tripping, or dropping anything” (110). Because this is a live performance, it is up to the actor to try and accomplish this physicality in real time. Ma-Gico forces him to do the task over and over and, should he fail too many times (which he often did), “An assassin steps forward as the KING stands trapped and trembling with his robe and symbols, a shambles of kingliness, and sticks a knife in his belly (111). All of this playacting has dire consequences, at least within the performance. A real performance failure leads to a theatrical death; the King is murdered on stage, all because he could not complete his performance correctly.

It is also worth noting that the items that this King is meant to negotiate are his “symbols of power.” These objects are clearly nothing more than symbolic, as Dr. Ma-Gico is able to declare his usurpation of power and make it so. An old ruler dies and a new one replaces him immediately, prepared to perform his role. Implicitly, then, this
play takes as its subversive stance the fact that an old generation, one no longer able to perform, is being supplanted by a new one. Once the King is dead, our magician-narrator is happy to assume his role: “I myself shall be king” (111). Unlike Mother Superviva who can do nothing to change Godiva’s fate—the Lady must play out her story as she always has for centuries—Dr. Ma-Gico can make whatever he wants happen at will. The power to rule resides within the power of performance within a Ridiculous play. Dr. Ma-Gico, a lowly performer, can perform the role of King, just as in Tavel’s play a line of advertising can supersede the writing of Shakespeare. The hierarchies of the past have come undone in the world of the Ridiculous. The play thematically hearkens back to the themes that Marvin J. Taylor highlighted as being key to the Downtown Scene.

Bernard’s play is renegotiating power through the performative and, by extension, is a subversive critique of the power structures already in place.

What, then, is the effect of this dark and violent Ridiculous theatricality?

Marranca explains, “Through a succession of ‘turns’ on the themes of evil, justice and betrayal, Dr. Ma-Gico invites the spectator—or is he a voyeur?—into a reflecting world of violent images, peopled by royalty, courtiers, and commoners. Ma-Gico himself is the narrator and actor in his theatre; the grand illusionist, he teaches by negative example. But what is the lesson to be learned?”80 In the same way that Peeping Tom must look upon Lady Godiva’s nakedness, the audience of The Magic Show is forced to witness Dr. Ma-Gico’s violent deeds on stage. Through this study of the act of “looking upon,” these plays throw into relief the notion that the theatre is a site in which outsiders are always

80 Marranca, “Introduction” to Theatre of the Ridiculous, 10.
looking at the actions of others; an inherent aspect of being spectators is being powerless to act.

The question Marranca raises of what “lesson is to be learned” is also important in light of the travesty of a tale of morality that Tavel created in *Lady Godiva*. Morality disappears in the landscape of these Ridiculous theatricals; they are not “immoral” but “amoral” in theme. In the case of Tavel’s play, morality falls away because these characters are only playing at events that were predestined for them. The sense of moral imperative is thereby lost from the Godiva story. In Bernard’s play, on the other hand, morality vanishes because we find ourselves entrapped within a nightmare, governed by the violent and the grotesque. In Tavel’s play, the characters are entirely powerless to change their fates; in Bernard’s, power is unstable, easily able to be lost or usurped, and is only executed in the most gruesome manner possible.

The use of Ridiculous remix undercuts traditional notions of power; the characters in these plays have no power over their own fates. With the exception of Dr. Ma-Gico, these personages are merely performers in someone else’s drama, with no agency of their own. Dr. Ma-Gico only asserts power through his performance, because, as he contends, “I, you will note, am very kinglike. Observe my walk, my grace, how the very air around me is scented with power and authority” (111). Dr. Ma-Gico is a king because he acts like one. The metatheatrical variety of Ridiculous remix privileges performance as a mode of enacting power.

The violent deeds of *Dr. Ma-Gico* can be presented on stage because they are couched as performance. We are not literally witnessing a murder occurring—we are consistently reminded that we are watching the performance of such a deed, which, for
the audience, creates a double-layered effect, the experience of watching a play within the play they have come to see. The theatre is no longer a space in which the audience can be safe from the horrors of reality; it is a site in which to be confronted with them. Because of the multiple layers of performance, it is hard to know where performance ends and reality begins—is the theatre, where anything can happen, really a dangerous place, one where someone can meet a grisly and untimely end? Or is it all make-believe, a sleight of hand, an act of misdirection, and, if so, might things that appear to be real also be similar fictions? The metatheatrical quality and the mixing of elements in The Magic Show of Dr. Ma-Gico highlight large philosophical questions about the nature of reality, suggesting that the Ridiculous may not be so preposterous a form after all.

Ultimately, in this performance, power is exposed as a tool—one that can easily be taken by anyone who wishes to perform the role of the person who holds such power. There is no safe fiction into which one can escape. The metatheatricality here suggests, through its remixing of layers of performance, that anything that happens in a stage world could have repercussions on the real one. It is never certain that performing is always associated with that which is not real. Through performing one could, as if by magic, enact power over others.

**Ridiculous Remix III: The Queen of Mixing (Conquest of the Universe or When Queens Collide)**

As the Ridiculous Theatrical Company is the topic for my fourth chapter, I will not belabor the history of Ludlam’s troupe here. Although “Conquest does not fall high
on the list of more successful works by Ludlam,” the play is perhaps the most significant in terms of Ridiculous space formation; because of differences between Vaccaro and Ludlam, the Ridiculous Theatrical Company would be born. Bottoms relates, “The fundamental differences between Ludlam’s and Vaccaro’s conceptions of *Conquest* resulted in a permanent parting of the ways, during rehearsals for the play’s November premiere. … Vaccaro felt that Ludlam was interfering too much with his directing; Ludlam that Vaccaro was ignoring the conception of the play.” Like much of the mystique associated with Ridiculous Theatre, there is no definitive account of how this split actually occurred. In his biography of the late Ludlam, David Kaufman states, “No one can say with certainty what precipitated the permanent falling out between Ludlam and Vaccaro. … According to Vaccaro, Ludlam just stormed out in the midst of an argument, which was unusual only in terms of his departure, as arguments between them had become standard operating procedure. According to many others, Vaccaro banished Ludlam.” However the actual break between the two may have played out, it was this production that forced the community of the Ridiculous to expand, forever extending the geographical reach of the Ridiculous aesthetic.

Upon his exit from the Play-House, however it actually occurred, Ludlam convened his own troupe of actors, made up of many of the original cast, who had left Vaccaro along with him. In light of this grand exodus of performers, Vaccaro called upon contacts of his own, especially from “the underground film community” and staged the play without Ludlam under the play’s original title. Vaccaro owned only the rights to

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the play’s title, so Ludlam could mount his own production but was forced to produce his version under the name *When Queens Collide*. As Gary Garrison narrates, “Ludlam’s new company found its first home at Tambellini’s Gate (a movie theatre) on the lower east side of Manhattan, but like so many fledgling theatre companies, the troupe continually traveled from venue to venue seeking a permanent home.” Ludlam had the distinction of two productions of his play occurring simultaneously; for my purposes in this chapter, however, I will only focus on Vaccaro’s production.

Vaccaro took a dark perspective on the events of the drama, which is perhaps the clearest example of Ridiculous remix at work: the framework of an Elizabethan drama is used to contain references from every angle of culture, while the characters are continually self-aware of their presence within a play. In this, *Conquest* is the clearest example of Ridiculous remix. As a practice of artistic construction, remix employs the concept of “cultural recyclability.” According to Navas, “Remix culture, as a movement, is mainly preoccupied with the free exchange of ideas and their manifestation as specific products.” This comment takes a seemingly positive approach to remixing: it is a culture in which ideas are shared as a common good in order to create new products. Indeed, Ludlam’s play may be the apotheosis of all Ridiculous remix practices because of its immense reliance on the practice of recycling elements from the surrounding culture. The play, at its root, is a series of quotations, lifted from anywhere and everywhere, ranging in source from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to a speech by Goering to

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86 Ibid., 3.
the Prussian police to the line “Goodnight, Mrs. Calabash” lifted from Jimmy Durante routines.

This collage-style of play-making was not entirely successful when it was presented on stage by Vaccaro and his troupe. Stefan Brecht, in his reflections at the time of the original production, notes, “How much of the credit is due Vaccaro as a director, I am not sure. … The spirit of reckless gaiety may even be largely his. Ludlam’s script seems less terrible than the production, more inclined to fun and games, not as black as the production.”87 Indeed, the play text does betray a sense that this play is perhaps more pleasurable than gloomy in tone, though it is concerned with dark subject matter, similar to that of Bernard’s play: a despotic ruler is willing to commit murder, simply because he possesses the power to do so, in order to conquer the universe.

One element of the production that Brecht is able to celebrate are the performances, particularly that of Factory star Mary Woronov, who took on the lead role of Tamburlaine. Brecht refers to her as a “superb actress” and remarks how “with hysteria, paranoia, she plays a bare core of sadist energy.”88 In terms of how these actors were directed to perform, this play is an example of the Play-House’s exploration of the portrayal of personalities on stage, as opposed to the creation of specific and repeatable characters. Bottoms notes, “Vaccaro’s emphasis in Conquest was, as ever, on personality rather than text: ‘Our actors are acting themselves as well as their roles,’ read the Play-House’s press release; ‘the real person [is] more interesting than the plot.’”89

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87 Brecht, Queer Theatre, 58.
88 Ibid., 57.
89 Bottoms, Playing Underground, 233.
this play, this is perhaps as much because of the strength of the performers associated
with the production as the thinness of the plot itself.

Although the production might not have been remarkable, as Brecht’s analysis
implies, what is noteworthy about *Conquest* is how expertly Ludlam is able to use
quotations, plot devices, and references lifted from many other works, both popular and
obscure, highbrow and lowbrow alike. Brecht highlights this remixed quality in the play:

Charles Ludlam’s *Conquest of the Universe*: some great little monologues,
replicas, cameos from the great dramatists: a firesale of theatrical properties. …
It’s crude entertainment: the stuff that in the good old days of the republic crafty
semites democratically cooked up alike for the robber barons and the ethnic
hordes is here served with the same broad gesture. Nowadays this fake glass
glitters like diamonds. But, more particularly: a slaughter of the theatre, not a
nostalgic gloss on mass culture…

Elements from all aspects of culture are being rescued and repurposed in this play.
Unfortunately, Brecht sees this reappropriation as a failure; these references are simply
made, these quotations merely restated, without providing the necessary commentary
underneath in order to be as incisive as much other Ridiculous remix is.

As much as one might be following the thread of the plot in *Conquest*, one could
also find himself preoccupied with trying to trace and place all of the references therein.
Indeed, such a task would prove time-consuming, as the play is overflowing with
borrowed content. In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman reminds, “Deleuze and Guattari
write that one form of minor literature dislodges referentiality by overloading the

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90 Brecht, *Queer Theatre*, 56.
dominant language to the point of explosion via neologism, hypotaxis, or semantic overpacking… This is a kind of ‘fat’ aesthetic that rebinds fixed meanings and allows new associative chains to form. 91 A similar “overweight” quality is found in this play, through an almost excessive use of quotation. The meaning of the narrative of the play—a ruler’s attempted violent conquests—is potentially undermined by all of the plays on words and cultural allusions included in the text. And yet, through undermining the play’s surface-level meaning, another source of meaning may emerge, one that is only clear when both form and content are taken into consideration. _Conquest_ is a play about possessing power, but the source of that power is not solely political rule. Rather, it is also cultural: it is based on how many references one has on hand and how many jokes one is able to tell.

This work’s originality is not found in the lines themselves but rather how they are being arranged, deconstructed and reconstructed into the framework of Christopher Marlowe’s _Tamburlaine the Great_. Both the Elizabethan source material and the Ridiculous play being scrutinized here tell the story of a tyrant’s rise to power and his subsequent fall. In Ludlam’s version, however, the telling of the narrative is only a part of the drama; the consistent quoting and misquoting provides a kind of game for anyone watching or reading the play. The winner, it would seem, would be the person who could identify the source for the most quotations.

As in Tavel’s _The Life of Lady Godiva_, there are poetic-sounding sections interspersed with the quick wit associated with the Ridiculous. For example, Bajazeth and Zabina wax poetic about their love:

Bajazeth: Within this restless, modern, hurried world, / We took our hearts’ full pleasure, you and I / And now the white sails of our rocket ship are furled / And spent the lading of our argosy.

Zabina: Wherefore my cheeks before their time are wan, / For very weeping is my gladness fled / Sorrow has paled my lips vermilion / And ruin draws the curtain of my bed.⁹²

Yet the conclusion of this scene breaks the highbrow conceit that this is verse drama. Zabina cries out, “I say to you and to Jove, my will be done… No more nuggie till Tamburlaine be slain or overcome” (34). The heightened language is undercut by the silly slang for having sex; the use of remix undoes the power of the language. Indeed, whenever anything appears to take a serious turn in Conquest, some popular cultural element is thrown in to offset its effect. When Hunger laments that “Every night a million Americans go to bed without supper” he finishes by saying “Twiggy, what hast thou wrought?” (37). The issue is no longer the lack of enough food to feed the entire populace; rather, the concern is the modern preoccupation with being thin. Despite its use of a hundreds-year-old play as a narrative framework, Ludlam’s Conquest is always specifically of its historical moment in time. Even though the setting is meant to span the lengths of the galaxy, the dialogue always returns to references that are distinctly American.

In this way, cultural power is always first and foremost in the hands of contemporary culture: this is what is most valued in the dramaturgical form of Conquest. In terms of power within the plot, as in the final episode of The Magic Show of Dr. Magico, the characters are forced to recognize that for every tyrant you unseat, another waits in the wings to take his or her place. Bajazeth contemplates assassinating the King;

⁹² Charles Ludlam, Conquest of the Universe or When Queens Collide in The Complete Plays of Charles Ludlam (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 34. All subsequent references from the play will be noted parenthetically.
taking Cosroe aside, he whispers, “Suppose we kill a king… and then a king…”

However, Cosroe already realizes, “Princes are waiting everywhere.” “Suppose by water or with poison kill a queen…” Cosroe suggests instead. But, again, Bajazeth knows what would occur: “Her daughter waits upon the stair” (43). Power cannot be undone in this society; unlike Dr. Ma-Gico who can instruct the King to his own demise and then usurp his throne, these characters seem entrapped by the power structures at work in their world.

Of the three Ridiculous plays looked at in this chapter, this is the only one with an explicit reference to world events. Tamburlaine goes off to conquer the universe, as the title suggests, ending his run by overtaking “Neptune—Uranus—Pluto—Cambodia—Laos—North Vietnam—South Vietnam—West Hempstead” (34). Pairing the conquest of planets with the part of the world in which America was engaged in military action could suggest a political statement; the juxtaposition of the Southeast Asian nations with a town on Long Island could be meant to expose the absurdity of such military conquest. This suggests a slight political undercurrent to the work.

On the other hand, however, such a reference could have been a mockery of the practice of trying to reflect world events in drama, common at this historical moment. As Kaufman reminds, “Conquest was not as aggressively political as a number of other works that had recently opened Off Broadway and fueled the protests to America’s role in Southeast Asia, including Megan Terry’s Viet Rock, Jean-Claude van Itallie’s America Hurrah, and Barbara Garson’s even more incendiary MacBird!”

Even in this play, so explicitly about conquest and abuse of power, we do not find in the Ridiculous any direct

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or specific political engagement as we might encounter in other theatrical works of the period.

Despite this interest in questions of power that we can unearth as a theme in the Ridiculous plays, the Ridiculous cannot be called political in the same right as many of its contemporary theatre companies. James Harding and Cindy Rosenthal note in *Restaging the Sixties* that “the blurring of performance and politics… was not only the defining gesture of group theatres that emerged in the tumultuous social context of the 1960s but continue to inform and shape activist theatre today.” The Ridiculous would not have fit within the confines of Harding and Rosenthal’s collection, nor within any discussion of so-called “activist theatre”; their works were not explicitly engaging in political debates. Any political gesture on the part of the Ridiculous was implicit in their aesthetics, particularly the negotiation of icons of twentieth-century American culture.

Unlike their more overtly political and/or activist contemporaries, such as companies like The Living Theatre, the Ridiculous artists were reveling in the excesses of mid-twentieth century consumer culture. Like consumers on Long Island’s North Shore buying up new appliances and furnishings with which to fill their brand-new ranch houses, the Ridiculous theatre-makers were accumulating cultural material from all over the cultural spectrum, using the particularity of their social position to their advantage. These individuals had access to both the low and the high because of their middlebrow status.

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Conclusion

But what does this middlebrow status mean in terms of our understanding of the significance of the Ridiculous? On the one hand, it suggests the kind of progressive gesture that Bottoms mentioned many underground companies were working towards in the 1960s—the undoing of preexisting cultural hierarchies. Simultaneously, however, this interest in a middlebrow identity suggests something much more problematic: a practiced disinterest in fundamentally altering the system in any way.

In fact, many of the artists associated with the Ridiculous, including some of those discussed already in this chapter, had aspirations beyond the underground downtown scene. Vaccaro’s company took up residence at La MaMa, which although still part of the Downtown Scene, gave the Play-House access to more mainstream audiences and theatre critics alike. Even working with Bernard was a move away from the so-called “queer” aesthetic of the early Ridiculous; “Bernard, a college professor with a wife and family, had little of the queer flamboyance of Tavel or Ludlam.” With the expansion of the Ridiculous into more mainstream theatrical spaces, and with the passage of time, from the radical late-1960s into the perhaps less revolutionary 1970s, the Ridiculous found itself more in a struggle for a place in the mainstream than happily situated on the cultural margins.

Play-House productions ultimately are preoccupied with the crossroads between high and low culture, a stressful middlebrow position, linked with the particular cultural experience of the artists associated with the movement. Interestingly, the plays studied in this chapter—all by different playwrights and, at least in the case of The Magic Show of

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95 Bottoms, Playing Underground, 234.
Dr. Ma-Gico, created at different moments during the company’s development—all share an important thematic link. All three of these plays are concerned with the desire for and the dangers of power. They explore this issue through the aesthetic of theatrical remix—blending bawdy humor with classical allusions, juxtaposing one-liners from popular television and radio programs with quotations from the dramatic canon.

In addition, however, all of these productions “remix” something else: the construction of gender. In nearly every play created throughout the Ridiculous scene, there is at least one instance of cross-dressing or gender play of some sort on stage. This is its own sort of “remix”; elements of both genders are blended together to create a character on stage. This mixture is more stratified than that of the cultural references; genders seem layered on one another to create something unique in the person on stage. In the next chapter, I look at this practice of gender blending on stage, particularly as it was manifested by one of its most innovative pioneers, sometime Ridiculous Theatrical Company collaborator and contributor, Ethyl Eichelberger.
Chapter Four

“Ridiculous Mashup”: Ethyl Eichelberger & the Performance of Gender

As time passed, the main site of Ridiculous Theatre began to migrate: from the once countercultural SoHo section of Greenwich Village to the East Village. Jay Sanders writes, “SoHo’s increasing gentrification and association with a newly defined, desirable lifestyle … pushed its art activity elsewhere. … What had previously been loft performances migrated to bars and nightclub stages—the Pyramid Club, 8BC, and many others—where forms of entertainment might actually entertain.”¹ The literal movement here is from the loft of Jack Smith to the theatres of the Play-House and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company to the club scene of the East Village.

Regarding this period of the early 1980s, performer and playwright Ethyl Eichelberger once said, “What’s going on down here now is a steady progression from the sixties. … Charles Ludlam used to appear downtown a lot. I went to Jack Smith’s house in the sixties to Flaming Creatures. All that’s happening here now is a tie-in. I imagine if you were around earlier you could go back even further. The Lower East Side, there was Yiddish Broadway down here. The clubs just took advantage of what was already here.”² Eichelberger’s work was a product of the location in which it was created. In his estimation, this site, downtown New York City, had always been inspiring groundbreaking new work and his contribution was only the latest in a long history of such innovation.

In addition, in this quotation, Ethyl Eichelberger travels on a similar figurative tour as the one this dissertation attempts to trace. Eichelberger sees the connection between what he was doing in his own work in the downtown club scene with what had preceded him in Ludlam’s early performance days and Smith’s all-night loft extravaganzas. The club scene, in which Eichelberger often worked, spurred the careers of many important performance artists, particularly those associated with the development of drag. According to Uzi Parnes, Eichelberger is somewhat of a link between what Ludlam was doing—creating plays—and what Jack Smith was doing in his more experiential performance art. Parnes states, “Ethyl bridged… both doing stuff that was more like actual theatre and little vignettes that he would do in the clubs.”

Eichelberger is a key Ridiculous figure, because he brings together these two important threads of Ridiculous performance types and Ridiculous performance spaces.

Ethyl, born in Illinois in 1945 and named James Roy Eichelberger, was an important theatre-maker, one who created plays based on the great works of literature—often taking the great female lead within those tales—while employing the tackiest of costume pieces. He would perform his works in all sorts of settings, from traditional theatre spaces to hole-in-the-wall clubs. Eichelberger was a part of an increasing trend in performance art—to perform anywhere and everywhere that there was a space suitable for performing. Perhaps more so than any other Ridiculous artist, Eichelberger was a product of an artistic scene already in place when he began creating performance art. Unlike Jack Smith, who was attempting to be original, or Ronald Tavel and John Vaccaro who were trying to flesh out the contours of a new movement, or even Charles Ludlam

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3 Uzi Parnes, interview with the author, October 8, 2013.
who was honing his own unique playwriting and acting voice, Eichelberger was inserting himself into a scene that existed before he came to it. If it is true, as Robert Mills contends, that “Queer-history exhibitions will adopt a style of presentation partly modeled on scrapbooks and collage; in place of the representative ‘object,’ they will appropriate fragments, snippets of gossip, speculations, irreverent half-truths,” then perhaps queer theatre, of the sort Eichelberger was creating, demanded non-traditional theatre spaces in the same way that these queer exhibitions would never make sense in traditional museums or galleries. Roselee Goldberg relates that in this period, beginning in the late 1960s, “artists stayed away from traditional galleries and museums on principle. They performed on rooftops, in vacant parking lots, or in warehouses turned studio-cum-rudimentary-habitat.” The dismissal of “Broadway-style” theatres went hand-in-hand with this avoidance of traditional museum display sites.

This interest in new types of art spaces was helped along by inexpensive rental prices for property, especially below Fourteenth Street, where the Downtown Scene took root. Goldberg states, “Cheap rent generated a particular aesthetic in the art of the 1970s, and the extraordinary spaces that it made available to a large and immensely talented community provided the model for exhibition spaces for years to come.” Performances such as those created by Eichelberger were a product of their particular historical moment—one in which artists were interested in experimenting with the form for their work—as well as the economics of the location in which the work occurred.

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6 Ibid., 100.
As Goldberg notes, this already existing landscape of artistic creation was heavily shaped by the economics of its geographical location. Downtown rents were extremely cheap; Goldberg notes, “In 1974, a two-thousand-square-foot loft in the heart of SoHo cost just two hundred dollars a month.” Therefore, such a space might serve as well for a theatre as it did for a home; to some degree, as is the case with Jack Smith’s works, part of a performance’s meaning might be embedded in its literal setting.

When the Downtown Scene began to creep further and further east into the East Village and Alphabet City, a new category of performance spaces emerged: performance clubs. As their productions moved into this new type of space, the artists adapted their style to the particular setting. In this way, performance clubs began to create a new form of performance; Goldberg mentions the role drugs and alcohol played in these settings as well as the desire for “larger-than-life performers such as Ethyl Eichelberger.” The raucous and exuberant setting in which many of his works were performed dictated an entirely new brand of performance art, one that, in the case of Eichelberger, displayed its originality most clearly in the ostentatious and extravagant on-stage representations of cross-gendered personages.

The bars and clubs in which Eichelberger performed were an integral part of his performance career. In his authoritative dissertation on Eichelberger, Joe E. Jeffreys quotes an “encore to Minnie The Maid” which “prais[ed] s.n.a.f.u.,” a site that had served as a theatre space for Eichelberger’s performances. Jeffreys notes that “its second verse paints a musical portrait of the cabaret”:

This is the house built by handsome Lou Tattoo

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7 Goldberg, “Art After Hours,” in The Downtown Book, 99.
8 Ibid., 114.
It’s perverse chic, don’t you think
Let Cliff serve you up a drink
Steve and Rick and John provide the view
They’re young and lovely, Suzanne and Charlie too
(Don’t forget Miss Kathy
she keeps everyone in line)... 

Here, the site is as important to the performance as the action itself is. In fact, that action is being shaped by the surroundings of the performance—the people who run the club and those in attendance—as much as it is by the artist performing. In a sense, this concept of interactive space builds upon the precedents set by Smith’s loft shows and the Play-House of the Ridiculous; the audience and even the theatre itself have as much a role to play in the work created as the artists doing the creating. Indeed, Eichelberger is an artist who would be shaped by the scene in which he found himself as much as he would go on to influence the shape that scene would take after him. His work is almost inextricable from the landscape of the scene of which it was a part.

Eichelberger credited the already existing Ridiculous Theatre movement with helping to develop his particular brand of performance. Building on the concept of a Ridiculous remix, Eichelberger was able to take various aspects of male, female, and cross-gender performed identities and layer them into unique productions that still concerned themselves with the blending and blurring of high and low cultural artifacts. Eichelberger’s works, like Smith’s, were ghosted by popular culture icons, such as Maria

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Montez, while also standing on their own as profound statements about the performative nature of gender.

This complicated performance of gender identities on stage is a crucial aspect of the Ridiculous scene. For this chapter, I discuss the practice of building gender-blended characters in terms of the concept of “mashup,” a contemporary practice of creating music and Internet content from the combining of two or more pieces of source material. In looking at Eichelberger as a case study of Ridiculous gender mashup, I hope to prove that gender, as a performed and performative construct, is constantly being “remixed,” and is always ghosted by the popular culture that surrounds it. For the Ridiculous, this popular culture was defined by Hollywood (feminine) glamour, such as that embodied in Maria Montez. Therefore, it was essential for these male performers to perform in drag in their productions if they wanted to embody these film icons; there would be no other way to personally personify the ghost of Montez, or other starlets like her, without representing those individuals outright. Mashup techniques were necessary to maintain the “remix” approach insofar as it applied to gender; this was a way to use gender performance to quote from other sources while still avoiding taking too realistic or serious of an approach.

Because of the important role that drag played in Eichelberger’s performance career, and the significant contributions that he made to the Ridiculous scene, I use him as a case study for this chapter’s discussion of Ridiculous gender mashup. First, I discuss the concept of “queer” as it pertains to Eichelberger’s Ridiculous performance aesthetic. Next, I provide some background information on Eichelberger. Then, I look closely at one of his most iconic performances, Minnie the Maid, as being an example of a
“mashup” style of gender performance. From here, I move outward to some of Eichelberger’s other performances, such as his *Nefert-iti* and his *Dasvedanya Mama*, to link what he was doing with gender to the rest of the Ridiculous scene. I introduce some 1990s gender theory to begin historicizing my application of queer as a theoretical lens in this dissertation and then build on the concept with contemporary queer theory, particularly that of Judith/Jack Halberstam. I connect the Ridiculous fascination with Maria Montez, who has been widely considered a mediocre actress, to the idea of “failure,” in Halberstam’s construction of the term. I am particularly interested in the way “failure” can be used as a way to understand cultural “failings” as their own type of success, at least insofar as these failures consciously break with traditionally held cultural norms. Tying this notion to a larger concept of queer—as both a performative approach to gender and as a remaking of cultural hierarchies—I highlight the potential progressive value of the gender mashups done by Ridiculous performers, such as Eichelberger.

**Queerness and the Ridiculous**

Due to this “mashup” style of gender construction on stage, these performances indulged in the playfulness of play-acting, drawing attention to the fact that they were performed through the blending of the classic and the tacky, arts and crafts items paired with designer gowns. There is no illusion in an Eichelberger play that one is peering in on reality. His works were almost always unrealistic and/or metatheatrical; that is, they drew attention to themselves as performances. Yet, for the Ridiculous, this often seemed to be the point of donning the opposite gender. The purpose was never to fool the audience into believing that the performer was something he or she was not; rather, it was to draw attention to the practice of performing, both because it is pleasurable and because
it was relevant to their experience of the world. These individuals felt shaped by twentieth-century America, which was filled with films and television advertising, the mixing of high and low culture on a regular basis. Ridiculous artists also noted the fluidity of gender identity as necessary to their aesthetic approach; in order to embody all of the characters they wished to play on stage, these artists had to envision new ways to cross gender in their performances. What they chose was a style that allowed them to layer a female character on top of their unique male frames: what I am labeling gender mashup.

This mashup technique for gender construction is a key aspect of what makes the Ridiculous a unique movement of theatre and sets it apart as a progressive type of artistic creation. The Ridiculous artists neither accepted the proffered models of gender presented in their youth nor the commonly exercised practices of cross-gendered performance. Rather, they found their own way to construct gendered identities on stage; by placing the female identities that they idolized on top of their own male bodies they threw into relief both the performed component of gender as well as their own progressive stance on gender. Predating Judith Butler and other groundbreaking gender theorists in some cases by decades, the Ridiculous performers, like Eichelberger, took an inherently “queer” approach to gender: they exposed it as performed, not as an innate part of the essence of identity. Additionally, these performances were “queer” in that, like the historical avant-gardes that preceded them, they broke with historical models for creating art, in this case cross-dressed or drag performance. Ridiculous artists, like Ethyl Eichelberger, proved that failing to be mistaken for the opposite gender can be a key component of, not a detriment to, drag performing.
Failure, as a theoretical concept (which I will engage as a key aspect of my argument later in the chapter), is integral to understanding how cross-dressing functioned in the Ridiculous. Jack Smith, for example, did not idolize the great Oscar-winning actresses of his youth; rather, he mythologized a B-movie star, Maria Montez. Smith accepted that Montez was not great by traditional standards, but she met Smith’s demands, based on his own rubric, for what made someone a star. By idolizing a failure, Smith suggests a whole new standard for greatness, one based on his own qualifications, not those of mainstream society.

Like Smith, who would go on to create a temple to Montez in his apartment through the accumulation of seemingly disposable objects, Eichelberger created his “female” characters out of many non-feminine characteristics: his own height and build, a massive tattoo across his back, lots of junk and arts-and-crafts materials, and his consistent referencing of the larger drag scene of which his performances were a part. Once again, one could label this artistic practice a “failure” by traditional standards. In fact, one could go so far as to say neither Smith’s nor Eichelberger’s live works were “great plays”; rather, they were demonstrations of characters in front of a live audience, manifestations of the combination of various disparate elements combined into a whole. For many critics of theatrical presentation, not having created a great body of dramatic literature would constitute an artistic failure. And yet, these artists created work based on their own standards, according to their own rules, not caring whether they failed the traditional system. With most Ridiculous drama (the obvious exception being Charles Ludlam), the idea was not to make a successful work of drama; on the contrary, it was to

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10 For more on this topic, see this dissertation’s second chapter, which covers Jack Smith and his Maria Montez idol worship in more detail.
explore what could occur in the act of live performance for spectators: a failure for traditional drama-making, perhaps, but a success in terms of avant-garde art.

This interest in performance, not solely in gender performance, is at the heart of what makes the Ridiculous aesthetic “queer.” As Jill Dolan states in “Building a Theatrical Vernacular: Responsibility, Community, Ambivalence, and Queer Theatre,” “To be queer is not who you are, it’s what you do, it’s your relation to dominant power, and your relation to marginality, as a place of empowerment.”

Queer is preoccupied with one’s actions, not solely with one’s identity or essential qualities. In this way, queer is epitomized in performance because performing is active; it is a way to engage with power structures and one’s position in society.

As in Smith’s rituals, these experimental artists reconsidered the role of the audience, often making them an active part of the theatrical setting. Like the “Total Pandemonium” one might have found in the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Switzerland, Smith created performances that demanded certain participatory roles from the spectators, though his were perhaps less raucous and more ritualistic. The Play-House of the Ridiculous, on the other hand, engaged the cultural icons most relevant to its spectators, daring them to recognize both the most obvious high culture allusions and the most obscure advertising slogans. In Ridiculous Theatre, the performances were for a particular community who wished to share in the live event, actively or intellectually.

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For Eichelberger, this “active role” for the audience was often built right into the sites in which he chose to perform, at least when these were downtown clubs. In these sites, Eichelberger needed to contend with his audience members, as the performers at the Cabaret Voltaire had, at least when he performed in a bar setting. These performance spaces would always have ambient noise interrupting or distracting from the performance. The Dadaists, as well as Eichelberger, embraced this new actor-audience arrangement. As Rudolf Kuenzli describes of the Cabaret Voltaire, “These nightly encounters with their audience, which was primarily male and composed of fellow dissidents, challenged the creativity and energy of the performers.”

Eichelberger also performed for an audience of the “converted”: fellow gay men who knew the drag scene and the sorts of performances associated with that aesthetic. This sort of “preaching to the converted,” as Tim Miller and David Román would call it, is a key aspect of what makes the Ridiculous queer. Although their claims could be applicable across the Ridiculous landscape, Miller and Román single out the “Playhouse [sic] of the Ridiculous” as a site where “lesbian and gay men were able to begin offering alternative representations to the standard fare of mainstream representation…” an act that ultimately led to “developing both lesbian and gay artists and audiences locally, regionally, and nationally … [who] forged energies to simulate and enact a sense of queer history and community.”

One progressive quality of Ridiculous Theatre was inherent in its applicability and appeal to lesbian and gay performers and spectators.

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13 Kuenzli, *Dada*, 18.
Eichelberger built on this “preaching to the converted” style of performance. Because of his audience’s familiarity with the aesthetic that he was engaging, Eichelberger chose to innovate within its confines, “remix” the remix, in a way; he took the kind of cultural blending seen in other Ridiculous-style drag performance and mixed it a second time. He drew attention to the performative nature of both the “preacher” and his “converted congregants” in order to engage topics and issues relevant to his community scene. In this way, it is impossible to discuss the Ridiculous without also discussing queer theory, as a theoretical movement. Although this dissertation is not the place to cover the entire complex history of queer theory, the two topics are entirely intertwined. Beginning with Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1984), extending through the gender theorists of the late 20th century, such as the aforementioned Butler and others such as Annamarie Jagose and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to discussions of queerness in performance, particularly camp, such as those writings collected by Fabio Cleto in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, queer theory has become a significant theoretical field, one that engages issues related both to gender representation and the performance of self more broadly: topics indispensible to a study of the Ridiculous.

Eichelberger chose to add his blended layer in his representation of gender. In this way, these performers took a queer approach to gender, seeing it not as an inherent characteristic but rather as another aspect to be performed for an audience. The idea was not to create a flawless portrait of a female heroine. Instead, it was to explore what might

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15 For a comprehensive introduction to queer theory, see Annamarie Jagose’s 1996 *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. Other key theorists, besides those directly mentioned in this chapter, include Michael Warner, Teresa de Lauretis, and Adrienne Rich.
happen—what or how a character might mean—when it is built on multiple gender identities. The Ridiculous conception of queer, although predating *Gender Trouble* by decades, seems to exemplify Judith Butler’s principles. According to Butler’s psychoanalytic approach to gender identity formation in her seminal 1990 work, “‘becoming’ a gender is a laborious process of becoming *naturalized*, which requires a differentiation of bodily pleasures and parts on the basis of gendered meanings.”¹⁶ One is not born a particular gender, in this model; rather, one becomes that gender through understanding the particular gendered associations of both physiology and desire.

In drag performance, as opposed to mere cross-dressing, the performer not only dons the apparel of the opposite gender but also takes on the physicalities and identity of the other sex. For Butler, therefore, drag becomes the key example of the instability of any sense of reality being born of one’s apparent gender identity.¹⁷ This concept, which reframes how we think and forces us to restructure how we understand the whole notion of “personal identity” is, if not radical in and of itself, at least a first step on the road toward change, in Butler’s estimation. Butler contends, “No political revolution is possible without a radical shift in one’s notion of the possible and the real.”¹⁸ In my reading, then, a queer approach to identity suggests something much larger than just an unstable sense of self; it is also a marker of potential radical change.

Other scholars agree with this broad approach to the concept of “queerness” and the applicability of that ideology to radical change. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Muñoz suggests hope as being part and parcel of the queer

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¹⁷ See Butler, “Preface (1999).”
aesthetic, something I have not discussed in terms of the Ridiculous. And yet, the concept seems quite applicable. Muñoz writes:

Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. … Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. Queerness is the thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic.\(^{19}\)

Ridiculous Theatre, despite often being cruel or even malevolent, or so silly as to defy value judgments, actually does precisely what Muñoz describes here. In these plays, there is not only a longing for a world in which other ways of being are possible; there is the actual representation of such worlds. In these plays, other models for existence are put forward, often for their own bout with mockery, but without any need for explanations or any grounding in so-called reality.

The profundity of this reading of Ridiculous queerness is that, of course, these on-stage realities were never manifested beyond the imaginative. In most cases, these artists were not political activists, per se,\(^{20}\) and their plays did not lead to grand scale political or social change. Rather, the plays depict these strange universes on stage, only to allow them to disappear into the ephemera of performance. In Feeling Backward, Heather Love argues that “the art of losing [is] a particularly queer art.”\(^{21}\) Stefan Brecht saw the Ridiculous Theatre as meaningful because of its connection with alternative ways of

\(^{19}\) Jose Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.

\(^{20}\) Some would argue that Jack Smith’s commitment to undoing “landlordism” and his pro-marijuana stance were political activism.

living. And yet, Eichelberger’s plays in particular are preoccupied with the fact that the world of these plays could not continue beyond their heyday on stage.

Dasvedanya Mama, for example, explained in more detail later in this chapter, looks back upon the great days of its protagonist’s performance career, bemoaning the loss of those great times; indeed, if “losing … is a queer art,” then no one knows it better than Olga. She has lost her career and all of the trappings of her lifestyle that went along with it. This character, played by Eichelberger himself, understands that there is so much more complexity to his/her queer positionality than just gender performance. Her position is queer because she still is performing herself, even after she has left the stage. For Olga, no matter how great things once were, all she can see at the play’s end is failure.

And yet, as Jack Halberstam notes, “Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well.” Therefore, failure, in all its forms—failure to make an impact, failure to change the world, and most importantly, the failure to be great—are integral aspects of all of Eichelberger’s plays. His work is not just queer because he often dons female attire, but because he accepts a different set of standards, ones in which failing to be great, based on mainstream norms, is actually a kind of success.

Therefore, these “female” performances may have failed at being “great” in a traditional understanding of theatrical performance, but they were groundbreaking works of art, something that had never quite been done this way before. In their failure to make art the way others before them—and even their contemporaries—had, the Ridiculous created a style of performance that takes a radical stance on the issue of gender. In “Drag

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Kinging and the Transformation of Gendered Identities,” by Eve Shapiro, the author asserts that “drag is not simply an expression of performers’ preformed gender identities; rather, the process of participating in drag communities may also function as a form of consciousness raising and a site of identity transformation for performers.”

Again, we see the emphasis on the concept of community: drag can be used by these groups as a politicized action in its “consciousness raising.”

Additionally, this type of performing can have an immense personal impact on the performer. In the case of Eichelberger, it marginalized his legacy to some degree; he is principally remembered for his cross-dressing as opposed to his playwriting or acting. Despite the fact that Eichelberger, if remembered at all, is recalled as a drag performer, Mel Gussow recalls, “With equal zest Ethyl Eichelberger played men and women.”

He had an illustrious career, playing many roles of his own creation as well as the classics, with “a rare and idiosyncratic comic spirit.”

**Eichelberger's Background**

James Eichelberger came to New York to be an actor, first studying at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts and then becoming a member of the Trinity Repertory Company in Providence, R.I. Yet it was the Downtown Scene, the center for Ridiculous artistic creation, that would be his true theatrical education. Both Gussow and

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25 Ibid.
26 For a more detailed account of the life and times of Eichelberger, see Joe E. Jeffrey’s dissertation “An Outré Entrée into the Para-Ridiculous Histrionics of Drag Diva Ethyl Eichelberger (PhD diss., New York University, 1996). Because that information is so well-covered in that document, I did not see the need to belabor repeating it all here.
Jeffreys cite Ludlam as not only a source for Eichelberger’s style of performance but also as a mentor. Eichelberger would perform with Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company, even starring in drag as Ludlam’s mother in *The Artificial Jungle*, the play which would be Ludlam’s last before succumbing to AIDS in 1987. Eichelberger, too, would be a victim of the AIDS virus, though he took his own life in 1992 before the disease could kill him.

Before his death, however, Eichelberger had an impressive career, performing various roles both in drag and out, with a cast of other downtown stars and on his own. He wrote 32 plays, though few, to date, have been published. Many of these are adaptations of famous works, such as *Medea* (1980) or *Hamlette* (1985). Others are original works; of such, many are solo performances in which Eichelberger presented a drag character of his own imagining, based on history, literature, or an original creation. From this last category, Eichelberger’s *Minnie the Maid* is one of his most notable solo performances (especially for purposes of this chapter), as his performance clearly presents the practice of Ridiculous gender mashup.

**Minnie the Maid (1981) as Mashup**

Eichelberger’s “Minnie the Maid” is made up of various elements, despite being a “one-man show.” This performance is a routine constructed of layers of popular culture, drag performance, accordion music, and tacky makeup. In it, Minnie, played by Eichelberger, sings, quotes from the surrounding popular culture, muses on life and love, and plays the accordion. Her look is constructed from Eichelberger’s long lanky frame, bedecked in a maid’s costume, and a great deal of flamboyant makeup.
This piece, like the plays of Charles Ludlam or the Play-House of the Ridiculous, and even Jack Smith’s late-night rituals, is a Ridiculous remix, a blend of elements from different aspects of the culture. Minnie is certainly a product of her contemporary popular culture—quoting from films and musicals—but she also hearkens back to popular culture of the turn-of-the-century, like vaudeville. Although this act is perhaps one of Eichelberger’s that is least influenced by “high culture,” in the rest of his oeuvre, there are many instances of classical works, such as Medea, which he reimagines in his remixed, gender-blending style. In this sense, Eichelberger’s club acts were a continuation of the “Ridiculous remix” practices begun at the Play-House of the Ridiculous.

In addition, Eichelberger used a blended approach when it came to gender representation on stage. In his representation of “female” characters, Eichelberger’s work highlights another key element of the Ridiculous landscape: what I call gender mashup. I use the term “mashup” because of its contemporary usage in music studies, particularly its similarity to the concept of remix, but with an emphasis on self-created artistic work. In Mashed Up, Aram Sinnreich contends that the role of DJ and other remixers of music creates a “middleman position” between the artist and the audience, suggesting that an individual can take something that he or she likes and then transform it to even better suit his or her needs. Sinnreich writes, “While configurative music practitioners acknowledge a breakdown of the traditional artist/audience dichotomy and celebrate the communitarian values surrounding the emergence of liminal roles such as the DJ/active fan/curator/connoisseur, many are quick to emphasize that gradations of
quality, professionalism, and artistry still do exist.”28 Through mashup, the audience can engage with musical content in new and exciting ways, though their creations may never live up to the quality of a studio-produced original. The original may seem to be of “higher quality,” but the at-home artist has the option to make what he or she likes from the artistic material at hand, no matter the quality of the finished product.

To a large degree, this “middleman position” is the role of the Ridiculous artist. Someone like Eichelberger borrowed from the cultural material present in the surrounding popular culture in order to construct works of his own devising. Eichelberger and others like him, such as Smith and Ludlam, used a similar approach to that of musical mashup when designing gendered identities on stage. These Ridiculous figures were “constructed” from the surrounding culture, like a contemporary mashup would be. In the case of Minnie the Maid, for example, Eichelberger blended the traditional French maid outfit with his male frame and then with the over-the-top makeup and hair associated with drag performance.

This drag performance, of course, was not traditional cross-dressing, as has been present throughout the history of world drama. Rather, it was a kind of “cut-and-paste” approach to creating character identity, similar to the remixing of existing works that Tavel and others did in order to create play texts. Yet, for Eichelberger and other Ridiculous artists, construction of gender identity went beyond remixing; and it was more than mere borrowing and collaging. They layered these multiple identities, one atop another, so that the mixture was not seamless or perfectly blended. One could parse through the various elements and separate them out, finding which pieces might be

cataloged as “male,” which “female,” which others “drag,” and even to some degree the source of those references.

In this way, gender is not quite a remix—something original is created from outside source material but those sources are not obscured in the process of mixing. Instead, performances of artists such as Ethyl Eichelberger are more precisely a form of mashup, particularly in the manner in which the term has been defined in relationship to contemporary Internet productions. Internet mashups, like musical ones, involve constructing a work from the layering of two or more other products. For Stefan Sonvilla-Weiss, mashups are distinct from other forms of remix; he writes, “Mashups as I understand them put together different information, media, or objects without changing their original source of information, i.e. the original format remains the same and can be retraced as the original form and content, although recombined in different new designs and contexts.”

In a mashup, a new product is created, but the source material is always recognizable.

This is the case in Eichelberger’s Minnie the Maid. Consider the opening to Eichelberger’s sketch; this monologue suggests that he expects his audience to know the familiar tropes of gay male drag performances. Minnie begins:

For those of you who wanted a classy drag act—I’m sorry. But I’ll do a little something for you so you won’t be disappointed. So here goes, classy drag act: Is that a gun in your pocket or are you just happy to see me what a dump blanche what a dump there’s no business like show business the calla lilies are in bloom again falling love again on the good ship lollipop stop in the name of love happy

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birthday mister president can we talk diamonds are a girls best friend of course I just farted darling do you think I always smell like this o Nanine I van to be alone.

I will not do Judy. She’s sacred. You can do Judy—and your little dog too!

This rant is a type of Ridiculous remix, as discussed in the previous chapter; it shuffles all of these references together, creating a pastiche both of the original works and of the numerous impersonations of them. Eichelberger is both evoking his own place within the drag tradition and setting aside what he is about to do as separate from it. Minnie the Maid, and, by extension, Ethyl Eichelberger, is simultaneously part of the classic drag tradition and a commentator on it. Within this speech, one can identify some various famous quotations, such as Mae West’s “Is that a gun in your pocket …” and Ethel Merman’s classic “There’s no business like show business” routine. In watching two clips of this same routine, I noted that the text changed a little bit from production to production. Still, the same major drag tropes were employed in each, even if to some degree the text was created anew in each performance.

This performance displays Eichelberger’s virtuosic talent. As was the case in many Play-House of the Ridiculous performances, this is also a performance clearly designed to draw attention to itself as a performance: Minnie knows that she is performing for an audience and recognizes what they expect to hear from her. The speech quoted above is incredibly metatheatrical, aware of its own position as a work of theatre, one that requires immense technical skill. Because of this, we cannot take everything that Minnie says as entirely sincere; as the audience, we recognize that she

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30 From Minnie the Maid, available via YouTube, at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNMry53o_GU
31 Minnie the Maid as performed at P.S. 122 is also available via YouTube, at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e1CetndjCqA
knows she is performing and therefore must always judge her as a performer first and a reliable narrator second.

In addition, the pace of this speech is particularly interesting. Unlike many of her drag contemporaries, Minnie resists being “classy,” suggesting that doing one of these tried-and-true shticks would have been just that. Instead, she rushes through this text, trying to get on to both her own music and her own musings on life and love. One way to interpret what Eichelberger was doing in performing Minnie this way is to realize that his intention was always to draw attention to the larger drag scene, exploiting how most of these performances are not unique, but drawn and remixed from the same pool of characters and quotations.

Within this section, Eichelberger hits on many of the favorite routines for female impersonators; Eichelberger’s act is clearly ghosted by all of the other similar performances that have come before it or are performed alongside it. Eichelberger understands what it is his audiences expect to see when attending a “drag show,” and attempts to appease these desires in his rant early in the proceedings. He recognizes that his performance is ghosted by all previous drag shows. As Marvin Carlson writes, “All reception is deeply involved with memory, because it is memory that supplies the codes and strategies that shape reception, and, as cultural and social memories change, so do the parameters within which reception operates.” The presence of this ghosting, discussed in greater detail in chapter two, clearly links Eichelberger’s work with that of Jack Smith; these are performances that are in tune with the cultural interests of the surrounding community. They may be performing for those who already appreciate these references,

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but in so doing, they are engaging in the queer practice of community building, perhaps
the Ridiculous’s most radical action. In addition, the *Minnie the Maid* routine is initially
filtered through the audiences’ expectations for such an act before it can be processed as
an original work. Eichelberger was aware of this, and made it his business to draw
attention to the spectators’ expectations in order to move on to what he really wanted to
do in the performance.

In this opening “bit,” then, Minnie covers many drag icons—Marilyn Monroe,
Ethel Merman, Mae West—while also making off-color jokes, like the oft-quoted “gun in
your pocket” line. It is also hard to ignore the mention of “Nanine,” as this was the name
of the maid in Ludlam’s famous cross-dressed *Camille*. Nanine the maid was one of few
female roles in the play not usually played in drag. Eichelberger’s performance is self-
consciously ghosted by the presence of other iconic female and female impersonator
routines.

The setting, be it a downtown club or the more venerable Performance Space 122,
as well as the larger New York City location, also influence this ghosting. Carlson
argues, “An audience not only goes to the theatre; it goes to the particular part of the city
where the theatre is located, and the memories, and associations of that part of the city
help to provide a reception context for any performance seen there.”33 Site is still critical
for understanding these Ridiculous works, as it was for Smith; Eichelberger recognized
that because of the setting of his production, the audience would have expected a very
particular sort of performance from him. His production was ghosted by the larger scene
of which it was a part and on which it was a commentator.

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33 Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 140.
Despite being ghosted, the *Minnie the Maid* bit lacks the ritualistic feel of a Jack Smith production, both in duration and in treatment of subject matter. These images are not worked through slowly, in a ritualistic manner carefully orchestrated to bring them to life; they are rushed through, mentioned one right after the other rapid-fire: something to get out of the way as opposed to being something to be revered. Additionally, the setting is not a specific site for these rites to occur; it can be either a raucous club, where Minnie’s performance must compete with the sounds of the bar, or a more controlled performance setting, like Performance Space 122.

This drag act seems most at home in a club, however. This may be because this was the usual site for such performances during this time period. In *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*, an anthropological study of drag performance of the 1970s, author Esther Newton narrates, “Female impersonators typically perform in bars and nightclubs. In most cases these are public places run by profit-seeking owners and managers who have no interest in impersonators other than as audience-attracting employees…. The bars are usually located in entertainment or gay areas of large cities such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, but sometimes in middle-sized cities, too, such as Toledo, Phoenix, and Indianapolis.”\(^3^4\) Eichelberger honed his own style of performance in precisely this sort of setting. Jeffreys writes:

Eichelberger’s theatrical sensibility developed in the club environment. At clubs like Freida’s disco, the Paradise Garage, the Pyramid, King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut, 8 B.C., and the Chandelier Club, his maximalist performance style took root. A style developed in conjunction with his Ridiculous experiences and in reaction to

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the rowdy club environment in which he found himself performing, it strove to steal focus away from the noisy, drunken chatter of late night bar patrons.\textsuperscript{35} In a similar manner to the way in which the location of Smith’s performances dictated their non-traditional structuring, Eichelberger’s works were very much shaped by his place of performance. The plays almost demanded a confrontational, direct-to-audience approach if they wanted to draw attention away from the social interactions of being in a bar.

Because of this need to draw an audience’s attention, to a large degree, Eichelberger’s characters needed to be painted with broad strokes, performed in such a way as to demand that attention. Additionally, they needed to tap into familiar and popular iconography to retain the spectators’ focus. Therefore, Eichelberger’s use of common drag tropes makes sense; these common quotations and routines would draw an audience in with their familiarity. He was tapping into the cultural consciousness of the larger drag scene of Downtown New York in which he wished to intervene.

Community, therefore, again emerges as an important aspect of Ridiculous artistic creation. For purposes of Ridiculous landscape building, the concept of mashup is essential to understanding how these artists’ actions of artistic production contribute to their larger underground program of artistic community construction. In \textit{Play It Again: Cover Songs in Popular Music}, George Plasketes states, “Another distinguishing feature of mashup music is its underground, do-it-yourself nature that usually falls below the commercial radar.”\textsuperscript{36} Plasketes contends that mashups are more commonly shared

between individuals as opposed to being sold across commercial platforms, like iTunes. In this sense, mashup distribution hearkens back to the kind of “connoisseurship” that led one to attend a Jack Smith performance: one had to know the work existed to want to access it and perhaps the only way to find out about such a performance was through interaction with another fan.

Indeed, these mashups of gender identities on stage were all about “insider knowledge.” This insider information was built upon the notion of a shared cultural lexicon that brought these individuals together as a community. In the same way that most Ridiculous artists revered Maria Montez, they likely also would have been aware of the drag tropes to which Minnie is referring. Similarly, their audiences would probably have been privy to similar cultural material as that on which Minnie riffs. Therefore, what the Ridiculous provided this community of spectators was sites at which to witness works constructed from this shared cultural language. Miller and Román argue the value of the theatre as a site for sharing a common culture, even if doing so means engaging in their titular “Preaching to the Converted.” This is because that practice allows for “community-based, and often community-specific, lesbian and gay theatre and performance.”

It was precisely through attending performances, which were created and then performed through their own language of cultural references, that these gay artists began building their own community within the Downtown Scene. For Smith, this took on a ritualistic aspect, complete with slow, meandering productions that needed to be performed with precision in the secluded site of his loft apartment. For the Ridiculous Theatrical Company and the Play-House of the Ridiculous, this involved writing plays

37 Miller and Román, “Preaching to the Converted,” 173.
that included references to all of the cultural material for which they felt some reverence, be those references classical or commercial. For Eichelberger, this could take place in the loud, social atmosphere of a club, mixing together all sorts of common drag routines.

All of these types of locations, from lofts to performance spaces to clubs, would come to be known as “theatres” of some sort during this era. In this period of immense artistic production, there was an explosion of “theatre spaces,” places where performances could occur, even though they were not necessarily theatres in a traditional sense. The club 8BC, for example, located on 8th Street between Avenues B and C, although not a gay bar per se, would be the site of many important performance works of the period; many of Eichelberger’s performances were held in this former farmhouse, made up of three levels. Such non-traditional theatre spaces almost demanded a new sort of theatre-making, one that made sense in these more interactive layouts.

These performance spaces, of which Eichelberger regularly took advantage, must not be underestimated in terms of their importance in creating what I call the “Ridiculous geography.” They provided sites in which these gay artists could pay homage to the cultural icons that they preferred and create art in the manner in which they wanted. Brett Beemyn notes in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community Histories*, “Whether in bigger cities like New York and Washington with a relatively large number of gay-dominated establishments or in smaller locales like Flint and Buffalo with only a handful, bars and cafeterias served as important sites for people interested in same-sex sexual relationships to meet and to develop a sense of shared experience.”

Although not every site in which Eichelberger performed was a space for gay people

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only, his performances certainly indulge in the sense of “shared experience” of which Beemyn writes. Eichelberger highlights this in his presentation of the laundry list of common drag quotations. He also pokes fun at it in his refusal to “do Judy” and then adding a *Wizard of Oz* reference as his punch line. Eichelberger knows that his audience will recognize at least some—if not all—of his quotations and uses this to comic effect, as is often the case in Ridiculous remix.

Yet, Minnie also wishes to get these common drag routines out of the way early in her performance, so that she can get to other topics of more interest to her. In particular, she tells of her misfortunes regarding love and relationships. She is the token female lounge singer with the storied past, who just cannot seem to get it right when it comes to romance. She also gives a subtle taste of what the “scene” was like, not from the artist’s standpoint, but from the perspective of a patron in search of human interaction. Of “lover number five,” Minnie notes, “[Harvey, lover number five] had intellect and a craving for L.S.D. Oh he was no damn good and I got bored and Harvey floated out the door. He stole my heart and most of my cash. But when I see him in the Village I remember the good times.”

She mixes a raucous accordion tune with a heartfelt, almost sad, narrative of an inability to make lasting connections in the Village dating scene. In a sense, Minnie, and by extension, Eichelberger, is using this performance to paint a picture of a particular place and time, in which Minnie was searching for love and Eichelberger was making art. This performance layers the same kind of nostalgia that the Ridiculous artists often have for the icons of their youth onto the scene in which they performed that nostalgia for like-minded audiences. Minnie is a completely “meta” performance,

consistently aware of its own cultural and historical positionality and drawing attention to that position through textual layering of references and commentary on those references.

In addition to textual layering, Minnie’s gender is also similarly “layered.” This character is neither male nor female, nor merely cross-dressed. Rather, this character is meant to refer to the entire canon of such gender-mixing performances; she is a mashup of many gender identities and also of other drag performances. *Minnie the Maid* throws into relief the form in which these characters are created. The references are all genre-specific and, because of this, are also directed at a particular community: those individuals who would regularly have attended drag shows and therefore known the routines associated with them.

In this manner, Eichelberger’s performance draws attention to the existence of the genre in which it operates. Realism has no place in this sort of Ridiculous performance; there is no imaginary fourth-wall through which to peer. In addition, Minnie draws important attention to her position as neither distinctly male nor female, exposing that gender, as a marker of identity, is unreliable. This aspect of an individual is not only performed, but can be built from the mixing of elements of more than one gender identity. Minnie wears a classic maid’s costume, accentuated with many jewels and gems. Alongside this, Eichelberger does not do anything to alter his tall, lanky frame; in addition, the makeup is so over-the-top as to suggest “performer” above and beyond any particular female character. His face is painted almost white and covered with lots of bright colors and glitter around the eyes, cheeks, and lips.  

It is not a makeup design that

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40 This description is based on what firsthand accounts, such as Jeffreys’s dissertation, record, as well as the clips on YouTube, cited earlier.
an average woman—or even a female lounge singer—would wear. Minnie is an original construction of character, in every sense of the concept of “original.”

**Nefert-iti & Solo Performance of Historical Icons**

Yet, although iconic of both Eichelberger’s performance career and what one might mean by “Ridiculous drag performance,” *Minnie the Maid* is somewhat unique among Eichelberger’s creations. In fact, Eichelberger more often played great literary and historical roles, as opposed to original creations. Like Charles Ludlam before him, Eichelberger was profoundly committed to casting himself in all of the roles that he believed he would never be able to attain in the mainstream theatre scene; Jeffreys quotes Eichelberger’s lament: “I wanted to play the great roles but who would cast me as Medea?” Therefore, many of Eichelberger’s gender-bending performances were adaptations of stories of great figures from history and literature, like Egyptian Queen Nefertiti.

In the piece *Nefert-iti* (here spelled with a dash), another one of Eichelberger’s solo works, he layers the female character of Neferet-iti on top of his own gay male experience. Jeffreys accepts this interpretation; in his introduction to the play in *Extreme Exposure*, he writes, “As a gay man, Eichelberger personally identified with these brave, struggling women. His take on these figures is intensely personal and deeply intertwined with his day-to-day experience.” Although this is never stated outright (Eichelberger plays the role as though he were the famous ancient queen), some subtle references within the text suggest this interpretation. Nefert-iti cries out, “It’s true most people

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42 Ibid., 73.
would rather queens should stay under wraps,/so to speak!/Hide!/Deny your feminine soul!”

One can see here how the mashup is functioning: the layer of the female character allows for the gay male person underneath to speak an important truth about how a gay male was treated by mainstream society. This line operates on both levels simultaneously: laying out Nefert-iti’s plight in her tomb while at the same betraying the performer’s (and his surrounding community’s) predicament in his contemporary late-1970s New York world. Again, here we find gender that is constructed through layering of identities.

Building on this textual gender mashup, Eichelberger is also able to pronounce radical ideas through his performance as this noted queen. Nefert-iti states, “No one is turning my priceless uniqueness into worthless guilt” (74). If I continue to read Eichelberger’s experience as a gay male through his performance of this female character, then a line such as this suggests a moment of activism. Through this role, Eichelberger is proclaiming a sense of pride in who he is: he may be different from others, as Nefert-iti was, but in no way should this be viewed as a negative. The former standards for ranking what should be appreciated and what devalued no longer apply. In the same way that the Ridiculous community of artists dared to hold Maria Montez up as the paragon of the fabulous aspects of acting, Eichelberger, through his portrayal of Nefert-iti, asserts his own prerogative to perform in the manner that he sees fit. No one can make him feel guilty for portraying characters in this “mashed up” manner.

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43 Ethyl Eichelberger, *Nefert-iti* in *Extreme Exposure: An Anthology of Solo Performance Texts from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000), 75–76. All subsequent references will be made parenthetically.
Finally, Eichelberger’s mashed up performance of gender undoes any notion of the self as some kind of fixed truth. Nefert-iti asserts, “But if truth were beauty, more girls would get their hair done at the library!” (79). The appearance of beauty is no more real for an actual female body than it is for a cross-dressed performer; it is something to be put on at a beauty salon, not to be found proven in some scholarly text. Identity, particularly as it is tied up with gender, is always performed in a Ridiculous work. Eichelberger’s solo works of the great women of the past are only the most obvious example of this practice. Gender, in this sense, is always a mashup; it always something that needs to be constructed from elements present in the surrounding culture, like remix.

Of course, also like remix, mashup is not a term generally applied to theatre. Plasketes introduces, “Mashup music, in its simplest definition, is a song or composition created from the master track and instrumental music of one song and the a cappella vocal master track from another.” Plasketes sees this practice, often performed by DJs, as an extension of jazz musicians’ interpretations of popular standards. A work of mashup takes elements from one source (in his description, the lyrics or text of a song) and pairs this with the background information from another source (in his example, the instrumental track). Unlike the remix, which can have a multitude of sources being blended together, Plasketes is suggesting that the components of the mashup are usually far more limited: in this case, it only takes mixing two elements to construct a new musical creation.

For Eichelberger, this mashup construction is not done by separating out the aspects of musical construction, but rather by parsing out those of gender construction.

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44 Plasketes, *Play It Again*, 205.
Eichelberger would layer elements of the female characters he was portraying on top of his evidently male persona and, markedly in the case of Minnie the Maid, pepper this with elements from other drag routines. For Nefert-iti, however, Eichelberger “mashed up” his own male persona with a feminine costume as well as some homemade accessories; “Eichelberger wore an original, black, pleated, silk, Fortuny gown. He accessorized with a large jeweled collar and papier-mâché headdress of his own construction.”45 Elements of the female character were simply donned upon his male body; he never intended to confuse the audience into believing that he actually was a woman. Both identities were to be obvious in this layering; they both lent interpretative meaning to the piece being presented.

“Mashup,” as a theory of artistic production has wider application than simply for musical composition or Internet memes. Plasketes continues, “The term ‘mashup’ can apply to any art form, not just music. The methodology itself is an extension of current society and the digital DIY culture. Mashups can be seen as content aggregation; they combine existing data from two or more sources in innovative ways. Mashups are not revolutionary, they are evolutionary.”46 Of course, Eichelberger and the rest of the Ridiculous scene predate this “digital DIY culture.” And yet, even though their artistic constructions predate the current moment, these artists engaged in many similar artistic endeavors.

Each artist built upon the work of those who came before him; to retrace the trajectory of this dissertation: Warhol stole ideas from Smith, particularly those related to durationality and anti-acting practices; Smith based his work on Maria Montez; Ludlam

45 Jeffreys, “Introduction to Nefert-iti,” in Extreme Exposure, 73.
46 Plasketes, Play It Again, 205–6.
contended that Smith was a key influence on his style of performance; Tavel and Vaccaro began their work under the umbrella of Warhol’s Factory; Ludlam broke from Tavel and Vaccaro’s company; Eichelberger cited Ludlam as a mentor; and so on. From the seed of Ridiculous performance, born in Smith’s late-night loft shows, came the entire Ridiculous scene. The idea was not to change the entire theatrical landscape in New York (as might be the case if the work were “revolutionary”), but to develop their own unique voice and style for making art, sharing what they had created and building upon it when each new branch of the Ridiculous sprouted. The style of Ridiculous Theatre continued to evolve as it moved from one site to the next.

One trait that each of these branches had in common, however, was a reverence for aspects of the popular culture with which they had grown up, particularly those that they found represented their ideals of glamour or their preferred modes of presentational performance. They then chose to mix these aspects with cultural elements considered more sophisticated. These artists were committed to B-level stars, people like Maria Montez, whose greatness was as complicated to understand as was these artists’ ability to turn trash into the treasure of theatrical properties. Eichelberger, for one, could find the perfect assonance in mixing a designer gown with an arts-and-crafts style headdress. The high and low are always being blended in one way or another in the Ridiculous because it is the aesthetic pleasure that can only be found in rubbish that these artists attempted to highlight, even in their Ridiculous performances of female identities.

Dasvedanya Mama: Eichelberger’s Brand of Ridiculous Remix

This mixing of high and low culture is nowhere more pronounced than it is in Ridiculous travesties of great works of dramatic literature. Like his Ridiculous
contemporaries, Eichelberger’s brand of gender mashup extended into his adaptations of so-called great literary works. Eichelberger was a versatile artist and playwright, and he designed works to be performed solo, as well as constructed ones for a larger cast of players. One such production, *Dasvedanya Mama* (1990), first performed at P.S. 122 in New York City and including in its cast Ridiculous Theatrical Company superstar Black-Eyed Susan, was a version of Anton Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters* (1901). In this incarnation, cross-gendered performance was once again used, as Eichelberger himself took on the role of Olga.

This role seems particularly suited to Eichelberger’s position, especially if we believe the claim that much of Eichelberger’s casting of himself in female roles was used to speak toward particular aspects of his actual life. Olga is a former great actress and begins the play by reminiscing about her grand old days upon the stage. She tells Fierz, “I am Olga Pluchinskaya, who was the greatest actress of the ‘60s. And the ‘70s.”

Although the character, as Chekhov would have imagined her, probably speaks of the century prior, this comment cannot help but hearken back to the heyday of the Ridiculous in the twentieth century. Indeed, by 1990, many of the great artists associated with the Ridiculous had already passed away, most notably Eichelberger’s mentor Charles Ludlam, or moved on to other projects. Like the characters of Chekhov’s play, a Ridiculous artist like Eichelberger might have been very preoccupied with looking back to the past, to a moment of greatness that had already ceased to be. Olga says to Fierz, “Does it not matter to you that all your friends are gone, that you alone are still here?

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rubbing the walls with patchouli oil on Sunday, and mopping the stairs? We are relics, Fierz, you and I” (268). By 1990, Eichelberger and Black-Eyed Susan would have been considered “relics” as well, some of the last remaining stars associated with Ridiculous Theatre.

Despite Eichelberger’s ingenious decision to put himself in the role of Olga to comment on his historical moment, what is most fascinating about the casting for this play is Eichelberger’s use of Susan to play Masha, Irina, and Maude. Black-Eyed Susan played the parts all at once, wearing a costume piece that allowed her head to be situated between two puppet heads, for which she would provide the distinct voices. Obviously, as in other Eichelberger Ridiculous productions, we are not in the realm of Realism here. The play consistently breaks the fourth-wall; Olga, for one, both engages the audience and, at one point, speaks directly to “Miss Black-Eyed Susan,” the actress, as opposed to any of her three characters.

More tellingly, Olga actually morphs into Ethyl himself later in the proceedings, offering an “X-rated [piece]. I used to do it down at 8 B.C. … Ah, yes, those were the days” (287). Olga then begins to mime Eichelberger’s Catherine the Great to a tape recording of his performance. Like Smith trying to evoke the ghost of Maria Montez, his popular culture icon of the past, Eichelberger attempts to ghost his performance with another of his performances, to bring the glory days of Ridiculous Theatre to life in his production, engaging both his own ghost and the ghosts of his contemporaries, and to wish them all once and for all, “Dasvedanya.” This play represents a farewell to a Ridiculous scene that had already begun to die, both figuratively and literally, with the
loss of some of its greatest icons. The ghosting in this piece lends a profundity and an overarching sense of melancholy to the otherwise over-the-top and zany proceedings.

Indeed, this play is a climax for the Ridiculous Theatre, maybe the final one. It invokes all of its key aspects—ghosting of and from the pop cultural past, blending of high and low cultural references, and mixing of gendered identities—while still seeing itself as a form of general entertainment, not a niche style for a particular group. Like Charles Ludlam and Jack Smith, who both disdained references to their work as “gay,” Eichelberger similarly dismisses that categorization. Olga identifies as a straight woman, “[not] lucky enough to be born a lesbian, like Holly Hughes.” She reminds them, “You want to see gay art, go over to the Public Theatre. There you will see living, in the flesh heterosexual men playing faggots, and they’ll make you cry and feel sorry for them” (289). These works even fail at being “gay plays”; they are something else entirely, something beyond representations of gay people or even people in drag. Olga claims, as Ludlam often claimed, that her goal is to “make ya laugh” (289). These plays are serious commentaries on art and performance that make those serious comments through silliness. Ridiculous Theatre succeeds specifically through failing.

Like many Ridiculous plays, the seriousness of each scene in Dasvedanya Mama is undercut by popular culture references; the play often intentionally fails to be the same kind of heart-wrenching story that its source material is. For example, in wishing for beloved Vaslav’s return, Olga must mention both that the “massive iron door [was] carved in the Biedermeier style my mother loved” and that her son was sung “tales of the burnished woods of Stolichnaya” (273). Although both references fit the European setting for the play, the firstreminds of the importance of consumer objects to the world
of the Ridiculous and the second, of course, reminds one of vodka as much as it does the deep, dark woods. Additionally, by the end of the play, things have devolved into a flurry of quoting; references to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, to *South Pacific* by Rodgers and Hammerstein, and to contemporary reviewers of Eichelberger’s plays are used alongside the forward moving dialogue. This play is as much a version of Chekhov as it is a remix of all sorts of other material.

It is precisely its failure to be a complete modern adaptation of *The Three Sisters* that allows the most meaning to come out of this play. The characters of this fictional world are not only experiencing the disappointments that Chekhov wrote but also the ones against which the Ridiculous Theatre once fought. They contend with the prevalence of American popular culture and American dominance, bemoaning “Oh, why, oh, why couldn’t [Vaslav] have gone to the gold rush in America and been trampled by the greedy hordes” (276) while at the same time recognizing that the underground culture of which they were once a part is now potentially as commodified as more mainstream entertainment. Olga, the former performer, berates the contemporary experimental theatre scene, crying out, “Listen, just because you work with the Mabou Mines does not mean everything is avant-garde” (277). Masha then mentions both Robert Wilson and Anne Bogart, to which Olga responds by bringing up “H. M. Koutoukas… An expert in the art of acting!” (277). Koutoukas was a playwright associated with the Caffe Cino, a direct predecessor of the Ridiculous Theatre, and a practitioner of a similar brand of pop culture-infused camp as the Ridiculous artists. By putting contemporary experimental theatre at odds with Koutoukas’s style of play-making, *Dasvedanya Mama* throws into relief the ways in which the Downtown Scene had changed in the past few decades. In
this sense, the debate in this late Ridiculous play is grounded as much in the nineteenth
century of Chekhov’s original as it is in the twentieth century of Eichelberger’s artistic
work.

Ridiculous Theatre, even as a form, is forced to engage failure, because although
its work with gender performance was groundbreaking, it clearly had difficulty
maintaining prominence outside of its historical moment and without some of its greatest
artists at the helm. Eichelberger, here, is exploiting that fact, showing that this sort of
failure was always inherent to this type of artistic work. It is Ridiculous Theatre’s
failings to be great—both as art and as impersonation—that actually allowed Ridiculous
artists to do and say something significant about American culture and identity politics.

**Gender Performance & Failure**

The negotiation of important female personas on stage is perhaps the most
striking aspect of Eichelberger’s work. The line between the masculine and the feminine
is blurred just by mentioning Ethyl Eichelberger; consider Eichelberger’s chosen stage
name. Saying the name “Ethyl” aloud suggests the female name “Ethel,” while, on
paper, the scientific spelling employed defies any easy gender categorization.
Immediately, it becomes clear that traditional discussions of gender—in terms of a
male/female dichotomy—are no longer appropriate to explicating Eichelberger’s
negotiation of gender both in performance and in life.

Eichelberger did not live his day-to-day life as a woman. Nor did he intend to
fool the audiences of his drag performances with his own femininity. As Eichelberger
himself once said of the impressive tattoo he had on his back: “I’d been playing a lot of
female roles, but I’m not a female impersonator, and I figure this would get the message
across. No serious drag queen would have a tattoo across his back.”

Eichelberger was never trying to be a woman, nor even a drag queen; he simply wanted the opportunity to play the roles that he desired to play. By extension of this practice, he was also creating roles that broke with the norms of gender performance, and even those of cross-gendered performance. He was creating a brand new style of gender representation on stage.

To some degree, then, the Ridiculous is directly in line with later theories of gender, such as those of Judith Butler. In Butler’s important Gender Trouble, she proclaims, “Drag is an example that is meant to establish that ‘reality’ is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be.” The so-called “reality” of a person’s gender cannot be an unalterable factor if one can easily assume the markers of the opposite gender. The performances of gender in the Ridiculous make a similar claim; reality is always constituted through and by performance. Neither identity nor circumstance is fixed. The self is always being made and remade from moment to moment.

Therefore, the Ridiculous can be understood as being queer, at least insofar as that term was applied during the 1990s, when Butler was writing. Butler continues, “The contentious practices of ‘queerness’ might be understood not only as an example of citational politics, but as a specific reworking of abjection into political agency that might explain why ‘citationality’ has contemporary political promise.”

These artists could use the image of the somewhat overlooked Maria Montez to their own radical ends; they fixated on Montez precisely because of her flaws. In this sense, she is, to quote Vaccaro

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49 Butler, Gender Trouble, 20.
once more, “the apotheosis of the drag queen,” both glamorous and wretched simultaneously.

In their use of what I refer to as “gender mashup,” the works of Eichelberger suggest a “queer” interpretation of the concept of gender. In this instance, I am continuing to look at queer in its 1990s incarnation, as these theoretical constructions of the term easily apply to Eichelberger’s performance work. As Moe Meyer describes the term in *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, “What ‘queer’ signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous, and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts.” Queer suggests a performative approach to identity; identity, and therefore, gender, are not fixed and can be assumed and discarded based on the circumstances in which one finds oneself. One is consistently making and remaking his or her identity.

This construct breaks with any sort of dichotomous construction of either gender or sexuality. Meyer continues, “The use of the word ‘queer’ to designate what is usually referred to as ‘gay and lesbian’ marks a subtle, ongoing, and not yet stabilized renomination. … ‘Queer’ does not indicate the biological sex or gender of the subject. More importantly, the term indicates an ontological challenge to dominant labeling philosophies … as well as a challenge to discrete gender categories embedded in the divided phrase ‘gay and lesbian.’” Queer does not allow for easy categorization or

53 Ibid., 2.
definition of an individual. Like a name that when said aloud suggests a female but when written down suggests a chemical compound, something queer cannot be easily explained as being one thing and not another.

To put it another way, consider David Halperin’s discussion of queer, also from the 1990s. In *Saint Foucault*, Halperin contends, “Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an ideality without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative…. [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.”54 For Halperin, queer is always associated with whatever is positioned against the mainstream; its meaning, therefore, is not fixed. It is defined through juxtaposition against normative culture. Again, Maria Montez is iconic of this: her greatness, for her devotees, is bound up with her performative failure, the fact that she was the opposite of what would traditionally have been seen as talent.

In addition, “Montez Worship” also creates an insider culture, separate from the mainstream. As filmmaker Nick Zedd says in *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis*, “She seemed to be a mediocre actress, at best…. I think it was some kind of a [sic] inside joke to gay people. They seem to find her an object of adoration.”55 One either understood what it meant to be an admirer of Maria Montez (a non-normative behavior) or one was perplexed by the act of idol worship in her honor (a more mainstream belief).

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55 *Jack Smith and the Destruction of Atlantis* documentary.
In this way, queer, as it pertains to notions of reimagining the concept of failure along side of the concept of performative self-formation, sheds light on the kind of theatre that the Ridiculous performers, such as Ethyl Eichelberger, created. These plays did not simply call for men to play women and vice versa; rather, they demanded an entirely new set of rules for gender performance and a unique set of standards for evaluating what is meant by artistic greatness. In the same way that Eichelberger “failed,” intentionally, to become a woman in his Minnie the Maid routine, Maria Montez “failed” to rise above B-movie star status. And yet, it was precisely this “failure” that can allow us to see the Ridiculous as progressive.

This act of failing is critical to understanding how “queer,” as a theoretical concept can still shed new and interesting light on the Theatre of the Ridiculous. Consider Jack Halberstam’s re-interpretation of the concept of failure: "We might read failure, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing."\(^{56}\)

There is an implicit power in the act of failing: one is choosing to go against the standards set out by others, creating their own standards in place of the previous ones. According to mainstream principles, Montez may not have been a great actress. However, the Ridiculous is supplanting that rubric for greatness with one of its own. In this way, they are remaking the system at large. The original standards for quality have been thrown out; in their stead, the terrible is celebrated and the supposedly great, ignored. Montez can be championed as a “great” actress because the old standards for evaluating good and bad have been dismissed.

In order to explore this notion of “failure,” the Ridiculous began their own process of character construction, born of a desire to embody the great icons, often female, of film and stage, such as Montez, and combined this with experimental artistic techniques, prevalent throughout the Downtown Scene where they chose to create their art work. Because of this “avant-garde” artistic community, the Ridiculous felt comfortable breaking with traditional aesthetic standards. Thus, in order to create their on-stage personas, the Ridiculous performers, at least those performing in drag, would often layer elements of the female character right on to their male persona—without any attempt to “pass” at being a woman by physically altering their body or personality. By “failing” at becoming women, these performance artists would succeed at creating something entirely new in their character construction.

Eichelberger’s *Catherine Was Great* (1982) certainly failed at being a realistic representation of the life of Catherine the Great, for example. This was “a show whose title was appropriated from a Mae West play”\(^57\); again, a reference within a reference, one that showcases popular culture as much as it does history. Rather than representing who this famous queen was, Eichelberger was more interested in “the rumor. So [he] played that as a sexual fantasy. That’s like a comic sexual fantasy that has nothing to do with the real Catherine the Great. Whenever you think of Catherine the Great, you think of the horse. Everybody does.”\(^58\) The production was more about this “comic sexual fantasy” than it was about anything else. Eichelberger played Catherine and made the sexual act with the horse, played by a person with a “five-foot-long balloon as a dildo,” a central comic set piece for the performance. This is an example of how these studies of great

women in literature and history, a major category of Eichelberger’s plays, were as much deconstructions of these figures as they were portraits of them. Eichelberger used his cross-dressing to throw into relief the most extreme cultural associations that society has with them.

Even his well-researched *Lucrezia Borgia*, from the same year, allows Eichelberger to explore the contradictions built in to our understandings of historical figures. He notes, “She’s not a nice woman” yet created the piece because “she was so maligned; there was this woman who everyone says was so beautiful and her father was the Pope. … And they say she was such a lovely woman, so nice, and yet she was just used by her family.”

Based on Eichelberger’s explanation of this historical person, any representation of Lucrezia Borgia would likely fail; it seems contradictory that she could be both a pawn and a person who did terrible things on her own behalf simultaneously. By exploring the contradiction—the failure—Eichelberger was able to show that even a historically accurate representation of a historical figure can be riddled with complexities not easily ironed out.

In this way, again, the Ridiculous took action in an aesthetic way—reimagining how to approach cross-gendered performance—even if they did not take particular social or political action. Their elevation of the low to the status of high, such as their emulation of Montez, an otherwise derided film siren, was a radical act. Eichelberger was a visionary in terms of drag; he found new and exciting ways to perform characters on stage, building on Smith’s Montez spectacles but adding his own unique comic touch. He also showed how everyday, commonplace items, as well as trash, could be elevated to

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be true theatrical objects, imbued with artistry and filled with theatrical magic. Eichelberger, like other Ridiculous artists, also performed in non-traditional sites, exploring what sorts of locations could be included in the category of “theatre.” In addition, the Ridiculous artists re-imagined what makes a performance “great.” With Maria Montez as their touchstone for exceptional performing, these artists explored the aesthetic possibilities of failure. Unlike many other Ridiculous performers, Eichelberger was formally trained, yet it was the anti-acting choices that he made, particularly in his female roles, that were groundbreaking.

The anti-realist preoccupation with the unfinished or the disjointed was part of the brilliance of these performances. These performances were not amateurish; on the contrary, it was only because of these artists’ great intellect and training that they were able to undo the norms of performance in their presentations. In *Traces of Light*, Ann Cooper Albright reminisces about Eichelberger’s *Klytemnestra*, another solo work, presented at P.S. 122 in the late 1980s:

Put together on a shoestring budget, with some of the intentionally worst costuming ever seen (layers of cheap acrylic curtains from Goodwill together with fake boobs made from stuffed nylon stockings strung across Eichelberger’s tall, bony frame), this was ancient Greek (melo)drama splayed out in all its twentieth-century vaudevillian glory. Nonetheless, the power of Eichelberger’s dramatic pathos resounded, even in the midst of a campy, S & M-inflected pastiche of late-
1980s performance art. A tour de force of solo acting, it was like seeing Aristotle duke it out with Andy Warhol.⁶⁰

This battle between the pathos of the classics and the aesthetics of Pop Art plants Eichelberger’s play precisely in the same complex crossroads between commerce and art as his compatriots in the Ridiculous scene. Additionally, however, Albright’s recollection puts great emphasis on the significance of the faulty nature of the female impersonation, the “intentionally” bad costume choices, the “campy” style, and the sexual overtones. This performance of a female character was much more complicated than just a man playing against his biological sex. Rather, it was an individual laying bare both the importance and the preposterousness of our most canonical texts and throwing into relief the reality and fiction of stage performance.

**Conclusion**

Despite how provocative and compelling Eichelberger’s performance pieces were for those who saw them, the works of Ethyl Eichelberger do not have the same acknowledged status of those of Charles Ludlam nor the more academic bent of the plays of Kenneth Bernard or Ronald Tavel. What Eichelberger created on stage does not always translate to the small screen or to YouTube. As Michael Feingold asserts, “A printed text gives only the barest sense of a performance art like Ethyl Eichelberger’s.”⁶¹ Much of what this actual performance is like cannot be conveyed in a play script; the performance involved interaction with the audience and continued to evolve throughout its run of performances. Like Smith asking his viewers to take on roles in his midnight

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⁶¹ Michael Feingold, “Editor’s Note to Dasvedanya Mama” in *Grove New American Theatre*, 261.
rituals, the affect of an Eichelberger performance was designed for live performance. For example, no play text could encapsulate what it felt like to attend “his Medea [(c. 1980) which] combined elements of Kabuki with old-fashioned hoofing and accordion-playing. … Medea bombarded her [rival in love] with small but deafening charges of live explosives (cherry bombs), sending patrons seated in the front half of the performance space scurrying for cover, hands over ears.”\(^{62}\) The works that Eichelberger was able to create needed the act of performing to be complete.

Therefore, having the text of one of Eichelberger's works may not mean that one actually has the blueprint for the production. Even of one of Eichelberger’s plays (as opposed to his solo works), Feingold accepts, “Dasvedanya Mama may or may not be performable by others; it may or may not ‘mean’ something in the largest literary sense. It certainly does mean something in the context of our time, and the climate of disapproval that makes every step into the imagination a step toward danger. One we should all take bravely, as Ethyl did, head held mockingly high, to a tangy accordion tune.”\(^{63}\) These works may have belonged to the artist who created them to such an extent that for any of us to stage them would inherently destroy their meaning. And yet, they do something provocative and potentially profound: they ask the performer to play a role with which he or she might not feel fully comfortable—be brave enough to accept the performative nature of identity.


\(^{63}\) Ibid., 262.
Eichelberger, it is clear, did not set out to be a playwright or to leave a canon of play texts for others to perform. Much like the live presentations of Jack Smith, these works might not make complete sense performed out of their historical context by another artist. This extreme ephemerality seems an important thread of the Ridiculous history; beginning with H. M. Koutoukas’s camp spectacles at the Caffe Cino, meant to be performed once and then have their texts destroyed, the artists looked at thus far seem primarily preoccupied with creating the act of performance as opposed to the performance text. The former is ephemeral, something that cannot be created exactly the same a second time. The latter, however, can have lasting artistic impact and can help an artist or artistic movement achieve a long-term legacy even after its own historical moment has passed.

This interest in the ephemerality of live performance certainly links the Ridiculous with much of the historical avant-garde. The Dadaists, for example, who were very committed to live performance as a mode of artistic creation, were also entirely disinterested in creating literary dramatic texts. Tristan Tzara’s version of Dada was entirely a-literary; Kuenzli notes, “Dada opposed society’s sense and logic by creating non-sense in the form of anti-art and a-art. Unlike Cubism, Futurism, or Surrealism, Dada is, as Tzara insisted, ‘not a literary school,’ denotes not a certain artistic style, but a rebellious, playful ‘state-of-mind’ that dissolves fixities, truths, and myths.” The same could potentially be said of the Ridiculous; it is almost anti-Ridiculous to call something

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64 For more on H. M. Koutoukas and the goings on at the Caffe Cino, see Wendell Stone’s definitive account of this important pre-Ridiculous site, Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).
65 Kuenzli, Dada, 17.
“Ridiculous.” The term must be used with irony—even mockery—to be used appropriately. The writers derided their own texts by calling them Ridiculous; by extension, how could the “Ridiculous” be part of a larger literary program for creating works of dramatic literature?

However, without a collection of “Ridiculous plays,” the movement has been continuously overlooked in histories of American drama. Eichelberger, for one, may be remembered as a drag performance artist, but his written works are rarely included in collected editions and other artists do not regularly recreate his performance pieces in the contemporary moment. The Ridiculous is almost solely remembered because of the playwright-director-actor-producer Charles Ludlam, Eichelberger’s mentor, Vaccaro and Tavel’s one-time collaborator, and Jack Smith’s unwanted artistic protégé. One reason for Ludlam’s canonization is that he, unlike Eichelberger or Smith, wrote plays that were literary in their structure and separated enough from his self as a performer as to invite performances by other artists. Ludlam also theorized the term “Ridiculous” in ways Tavel did not, even if Tavel was its initial creator. Therefore, in some sense, all legacy of the Ridiculous, not just Eichelberger’s performance career, can be credited back to Charles Ludlam.

But what does this connection with Ludlam do to the progressive quality of the Ridiculous? Ludlam, unlike Smith or even Eichelberger, was certainly concerned with commercial theatrical success. Even though he was able to bring the Ridiculous style of theatre to a wider artistic audience, he also undid its most progressive component: its construction of an “alternative” style of theatre-making as well as lifestyle. As Brecht contends of Ridiculous Theatre in *Queer Theatre*, “Essentially I think this theatre
proposes a certain ideal life-style or attitude, doing theatre as part of living that way, which it conveys by its style on stage and which it defends in its plays by ridiculing its opposite and in no other way because that life-style is rigorously indefensible.”

Ridiculous Theatre was born as a truly underground movement, one that asked its participants not only to make art in a new way, but to live their lives in a new way as well. Brecht continues, “The theatre of the ridiculous is produced by a family or families of approximately free persons as part of their family life. Its members adopt and act roles as the f.p. playfully assumes his identity—without identifying and only for the sake of playing them.” Indeed, Brecht was a relative of this Ridiculous family; his wife Mary created costumes for Ludlam, making her a part of his clan. All identity in this Ridiculous landscape was meant to be performative; nothing was fixed and all sense of self was always in flux, always to be performed.

In this way, Eichelberger was the quintessential Ridiculous downtown underground performer; his works altered our understanding of performance through their assertion of the principles of gender theory, even though much of his work predates these theoretical texts. What would happen, then, if this performative approach to character building associated with the Ridiculous began to move uptown? And, when the Ridiculous aesthetic did move to more commercial spaces, as it would with artists like Charles Busch, what became of its more radical flare? Were these works simply the “farces” that Jack Smith bemoaned his style becoming because of Ludlam? Or were they able to maintain their subversive quality despite their more mainstream locales? I tackle these questions in the next chapter, where I look at artists who have clearly credited

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Ludlam as a source—such as the aforementioned Busch and Pulitzer Prize-winner Tony Kushner—as well as those that seem to build on the Ridiculous work, even if they have not directly spoken about their connection to it. Eichelberger was not the last bit of legacy of the Ridiculous scene; rather, his work was only the beginning of a new generation of artists who were inspired by the works of Ludlam and other Ridiculous artists.
Chapter Five

“Ridiculous Legacy”: The Ridiculous Aesthetic Across Generations and Geographies

Despite being a unique and self-contained artistic movement, it makes sense to discuss the Ridiculous in context; it has antecedents in the historical avant-garde as well as descendants in the contemporary theatre scene. Uzi Parnes suggested, “The Ridiculous is just one form of Pop Performance.”¹ For him, and for the few other scholars who have addressed the Ridiculous in their theatre studies, Ridiculous Theatre is often discussed as a part of the Pop Art scene, as opposed to as its own form. Aspects of its aesthetic appear in movements that long predate it—such as Dadaism—and continue to exist in contemporary art. In order to understand why the Ridiculous is such a significant artistic movement, it is useful to track its legacy. Many innovative artists credit the Ridiculous as a key influence. Without the impact of Ridiculous theatre—without exposure to the Ridiculous geography—these contemporary visionaries might never have continued to innovate in the ways that they have. Therefore, legacy is a vital element to trace when drawing the boundaries of the Ridiculous landscape.

The legacy of the Ridiculous is rich and varied. Certainly, the Ridiculous aesthetic has carried through into contemporary downtown performance. Performers like Taylor Mac possess a Ridiculous quality. Mac’s recent performance in the Public Theatre’s Good Person of Szechwan “suggest[ed] mischief in the making.”² However, Mac ultimately used drag to similarly complex and meaningful ends regarding the stakes

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¹ Uzi Parnes, interview with the author, October 8, 2013.
of the performance of gender as Ludlam and Ethyl Eichelberger had before him. In addition, the Ridiculous can be seen to have brought its use of gender bending and cultural remixing as far uptown as Broadway stages. The Ridiculous geography has expanded in recent decades.

On one hand, the progressive power of these aesthetic techniques may be diminished by this movement away from their original place and time of production. On the other, the use of these techniques by commercial stages shows how queer performance has entered into discussions of even the most mainstream of theatrical forms. How we understand American theatre is shaded by Theatre of the Ridiculous. Knowing its key elements helps the contemporary theatre fan interpret the works being produced at the current moment. Productions such as Peggy Shaw’s *Ruff* at La MaMa and Charles Busch’s *The Tribute Artist* at 59E59 in the winter of 2014, as well as the spring 2014 Broadway production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* all display the pervasiveness of Ridiculous theatrics in contemporary performance.

Despite the importance of legacy, the “Ridiculous,” as a historical movement, seems to have come to an end. If, as I claim in the third chapter on the Play-House of the Ridiculous, Ridiculous Theatre as a form and a movement begins on June 29, 1965, it can also be said to have come to an end. Perhaps there is not as specific a date, but certainly by sometime in the late 1990s. As I discussed in the previous chapter, Ethyl Eichelberger’s 1990 *Dasvedanya Mama* operates on one level as an homage to the lost glory days of Ridiculous Theatre. The final song, ostensibly from Vaslav to his recently deceased mother Olga, played by Eichelberger, has particular resonance in this context. Vaslav intones, “Dasvedanya, Mama/My lover and my friend/I’ll cherish your sweet
Until I reach the end/Of this strange life I’m leading/I know I’ve been a
beast/But when I’m gone it’s famine/And when I’m here it’s feast.”

If we remember that Eichelberger saw Ludlam as not only an influence but also as a mentor for his work and know that Ludlam had died only about three years before this show premiered, it becomes clear that this lament could be meant for him and the artists like him. These artistic greats were lost before their time, leaving those behind to be artists out of time, working in an aesthetic that had also already begun to die or was actively dying at that time.

The death of the Ridiculous is very much intertwined with the deaths of its great artistic minds. Ludlam, for one, begged his partner—both theatrical and romantic—Everett Quinton to continue his theatre, the RTC. Ludlam recorded a version of their negotiations, in which Everett fears, “But they won’t do what I tell them.” “They will if you pay them,” Charles responds. Although this was true for a time, and audiences did accept Quinton’s brand of Ridiculous Theatre, despite his fear that “the audiences want you,” meaning Ludlam, he could not sustain the company for as long as Ludlam had.

Ridiculous Theatre lost its power to command even its own stages by the mid-1990s. In his *Historical Dictionary of Contemporary American Theatre*, James Fisher credits

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4 Dialogue by Charles Ludlam, reprinted in *Ridiculous! The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam*, by David Kaufman (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2002), 450. Of the one-page scene, Kaufman notes that it “was based on a conversation that actually transpired between Quinton and himself [Ludlam]. Ludlam probably wrote it sometime in March, at a moment when he was feeling ill and realized his days might be numbered.”
Quinton with keeping the company running at One Sheridan Square until 1997,\(^5\) with the Axis Theatre taking over the space in 1998.\(^6\) Obviously, the loss of key artists, like Ludlam, did not help the situation; how could a form exist without its preeminent practitioners?

Additionally, however, the mid-1990s were a very different time from the mid-1960s, the era in which the Ridiculous was born. By 1997, New York rents were higher and theatre was more of a commercial commodity, even in its off-Broadway incarnations. In *Selling the Lower East Side*, Christopher Mele discusses this “renaissance” or “death” of the Lower East Side—depending on one’s perspective on the matter—in terms of an undoing of earlier stereotypes associated with the locale. Instead of being a site for the lower classes or a minority ghetto, by the 1990s, “The real estate sector and state actors consistently put forth notions of a desired, revitalized East Village or Lower East Side that contradicted existing sociocultural conditions.”\(^7\) This new vision of lower Manhattan encouraged a more bourgeois clientele to snatch up property in the area. The changing face of the Village led to changes in the artistic scene, creating a landscape less conducive to a Ridiculous Theatre, both socially and economically.

Ridiculous Theatre, then, can be seen as a product of its own historical moment. It was born of a time when gay rights were coming to the forefront and when downtown New York was a renowned site for art-making. If Wendell Stone is correct, and the Caffe

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\(^6\) Under the “History” tab of their website, the Axis Company provides a brief but thorough overview of the site’s storied past. http://www.axiscompany.org/history.htm

Cino was the “birthplace of off-off-Broadway,” it is likely because Greenwich Village was, throughout the twentieth century, “a hub of nontraditional politics, art, and thought in the United States…. In the 1960s it would be rivaled only by San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury as the center of the counterculture movement.”

This particular locale lent itself perfectly to work, both artistic and political, that questioned the status quo.

Even if Ridiculous plays were not political in a didactic way, like some of the plays of Bertolt Brecht, they were certainly subversive, through their aesthetic choices if nothing else. When asked whether he thought of the work of Jack Smith and Ethyl Eichelberger as “political,” Parnes claimed that they were, “not in the… hit you over the head with a brick kind of political, but in the Brechtian concept of…as a subterfuge in the plot and somehow that coming through as the message… It could be hysterical but it was still inherently political.”

These works do, in fact, share in an inheritance from Brecht; they find a way through their artistic construction to present the audience with issues worth considering. As Ludlam claimed, you might laugh or cry at his *Camille*, but in either case, she affected you.

Many contemporary artists credit the “effect” of the Ridiculous for the experimental artistic work that they would go on to create. Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman, for example, both single out Jack Smith as an important precursor to their own esoteric work, while both Charles Busch and Tony Kushner cite Ludlam as a key influence on the plays they have created. Yet the plays by Wilson, Foreman, Busch and Kushner have all garnered far more substantial critical and commercial success than

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9 Parnes, interview, October 8, 2013.
10 See chapter two.
either those of Smith or Ludlam ever did. What does this increased cultural impact do to the claims that this work was subtly political in its aesthetic construction? The Ridiculous is often known through its legacy and yet that legacy is quite difficult to trace with certainty. So much of what we now see on commercial stages seems in line with Ridiculous aesthetic principles yet without the Ridiculous’s radical qualities. Therefore, in order to understand the valence of tracing a Ridiculous lineage, in this chapter, I consider the legacy of the Ridiculous, particularly what happens to this aesthetic when it is moved uptown.

Ultimately, I see it both ways. Someone like Ludlam would have been thrilled to see his theatre move uptown and become profitable; Ludlam sought commercial success and recognition, even if he was suspicious of the Broadway model of theatre-making. Ludlam writes, “I want a big commercial success, I do. It’s very hard for an artist to make a living. I wonder if at a certain point we’ll have to charge a hundred dollars per ticket.” On the other hand, however, artists like Jack Smith and Ethyl Eichelberger eschewed this sort of limelight. In Smith’s case, his main fame is in influence, not actual practice. Yet, as Sally Banes notes Smith may have inspired contemporary performance art, but he was able to do something with his aesthetic choices that his descendants could not master. Banes writes:

Smith’s performance used the iconography of Disney cartoons, movie stars, exotic dancers, of musty junkpiles whose particulars were hard to discern in the gloomy auditorium. But, unlike his contemporaries, the Pop artists, who took a

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cool, ironic stance in relation to this kind of imagery, unlike the Lower East Side cabaret acts of the 1980s, whose imitations of popular entertainers use distancing to either comment on or simply assimilate mainstream commercial art, Smith is a kind of alchemist.\(^\text{12}\)

Smith accomplished something in his live performances that none of his inheritors have been able to recreate. Rather than being remembered as inspiration to others, a commercial success may have allowed these artists’ plays to be remembered in their own rights, not just for what and whom they inspired. Despite this, however, avoiding commercialization preserved what was most radical about these Ridiculous artists.

As a commercial entity, the Ridiculous changes; it is no longer a subversive form scrutinizing both gender construction and cultural hierarchy, but instead a jazzy postmodern form that embraces the performativity of all things insofar as this aesthetic can be used to appeal to a cynical contemporary moment and culture. Legacy is a double-edged sword for the Ridiculous; it serves to remind us of the important contributions of the four artists/companies that I study in this dissertation while at the same time overshadowing them. It often contains our only live and active traces of this aesthetic while continually obscuring them with its ultimate commerciality.

**Living Legacy**

Indeed, at least Ridiculous acting style has found methods of adapting to our contemporary moment. Ridiculous performers like Black-Eyed Susan and Everett Quinton are still performing in New York. Even a play like *Reid Farrington’s A_

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Christmas Carol, which starred Quinton during the 2012 holiday season, showed evidence of his Ridiculous training. He was able to incarnate each of the Scrooges referenced, both the ones of great artistic merit and the ones from children’s entertainment, a Ridiculous remix in its own right.

Quinton’s acting style also betrayed an over-the-top quality, which worked perfectly for the “trippy performance.”\(^{13}\) Certainly, this sort of acting style has always been associated with Ridiculous Theatre and now, in a seemingly post-Ridiculous world, it has carried over into Ridiculous artists’ non-Ridiculous performances. In the contemporary downtown scene, which often honors “weird” aesthetic choices, albeit without an organizing principle provided by an aesthetic movement, this sort of acting absolutely works, even in a show that, at the performance I attended, drew mostly children as its audience members.

In addition, although I am arguing that specific sites make up the geography of the Ridiculous, ultimately that landscape may be more expansive than I am giving it credit for being. Certainly there were other sites, such as La MaMa E. T. C. that are still operational and participated in Ridiculous theatrical production. The LaMaMa archive lists the important queer production *Son of Cockstrong*, written by Tom Murrin and presented by the “Playhouse [sic] of the Ridiculous” as opening on February 20, 1970,\(^{14}\) a fairly early date in the Ridiculous history. Ellen Stewart’s La MaMa is as Ridiculous a site as any other theatre previously mentioned, both because of the Play-House’s


residency and because of Stewart’s continued encouragement of new and experimental artists. Yet, this site also seems larger than many other Ridiculous landmarks; it was a producing house, not a company, and therefore was able to adapt as the Downtown Scene changed over time. This quality allows it to remain operational, as other Ridiculous sites have changed entirely.

Even productions as recent as winter 2014 demonstrate the alliance between La MaMa and Ridiculous Theatre. *Ruff*, conceived by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, of Split Britches fame, and performed by Shaw, invokes the ghosts of the Ridiculous throughout its presentation. This makes sense, as Split Britches is one company that likely belongs on a Ridiculous map, though they have been discussed in many other aesthetic and cultural contexts. Although not Ridiculous practitioners per se, there are certainly key aesthetic overlaps between the works of Split Britches and Ridiculous Theatre.

In response to whether she considered her work Ridiculous, Peggy Shaw stated, “no, I see my work as a combination of Hot Peaches and Spiderwoman theater, I did not think of my work as ridiculous. I thought of it as garbage aesthetic, and exploring gender and queerness by being myself, and celebrating my otherness and my lesbianness, which was highly unexplored. Everything was up for grabs, and I wanted to make lesbians funny, and a ‘given’ onstage.”15 I do not wish to contend that Split Britches was

15 Peggy Shaw, email message to author, February 27, 2014. Sue-Ellen Case’s book on Split Britches covers the company’s connections with Hot Peaches and Spiderwoman. Stefan Brecht discusses Hot Peaches in *Queer Theatre*, contrasting it with Ludlam’s Ridiculous, while Spiderwoman contributor Ana Maria Simo dismissed the radical qualities of the Ridiculous (see “From the Invisible to the Ridiculous” in *The Queerest Art*). These companies suggest important connections—and counterpoints—to the Ridiculous discussion that I conduct in this dissertation.
something it was not—Shaw was clear that her work was not Ridiculous. In fact, Shaw contends that she “didn’t consider [the works of Ludlam and those around him] as a movement.” Rather, she states, “There was a type of convergence of talent in the GAY scene, and it was all soooo new, and sooo exciting, and reacting to years of feeling oppressed by straight theater content as well as format and hierarchy.”

Perhaps it was because of this that, although not specifically operating as a cohesive theatrical movement might, both the works of Split Britches and Ridiculous Theatre works often include cultural references from both highbrow and lowbrow culture—a definite Ridiculous remix—while always including some form of gender mashup performance.

Shaw invokes the Ridiculous in *Ruff*, blending references from all over culture, including her own history, in order to talk about experiences related to her stroke. In this production, Shaw and Weaver emphasize the need to laugh in the face of the terror of human mortality. The play suggests a post-absurdist perspective; if the absurdist playwrights had exposed our human condition, then it seems up to the Ridiculous performers to embrace the fact that there is nothing we can do in light of it but laugh. This one-person show is incredibly funny, yet it is punctuated with some serious moments, moments that remind one of the ritualistic quality of early Ridiculous theatre as it was performed in Jack Smith’s apartment.

Shaw does not shy away from the ghosts of her past; rather, she invites them on stage with her. In discussing facing her own mortality, she also engages the mortality that took so many of her friends and collaborators in preceding years. She links her own stroke to the death of Ellen Stewart, saying, “The day Ellen Stewart died/I dreamt she

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16 Shaw, email, February 27, 2014.
was pulling me with her, her silver fingernails digging into my shoulders and arms, dragging me down with her cause she was lonely.”¹⁷ As the piece was performed in Stewart’s La MaMa, it is hard not to feel her presence in the space with Shaw and her audiences. Yet Shaw allows this ghosting to go further, dedicating the piece to Ethyl Eichelberger and using a video of his performances as a backdrop, even as a co-performer, at one point in the night’s proceedings. Like Smith’s “expanded cinema,” the use of this video backdrop allows a ghost literal access to the stage space. The presence of Eichelberger seems to be everywhere in this play, not only in that video recording: he is present in the use of accordion music, the interest in drag as a performative practice, in the overall theme of how one lives in the face of medical tragedy. Shaw may ostensibly be performing on her own, but she opens her stage to the spirits of all those who had performed with her and gone before her.

Like in an Absurd drama, there seems to be a maddening quality to objects and their proliferation. At one point, Shaw stuffs her face with pieces of bubble gum. Yet, Shaw allows her performance to go beyond absurdity to become something more complex. While narrating a dream about jumping off the George Washington Bridge, inflatable fish join Shaw on stage. Rather than being simply a silly moment, Shaw takes this opportunity to invoke the names of some of those she might see if she actually did journey to the other side.¹⁸ During the performance I saw, on January 9, 2014, one of those names was that of Charles Ludlam. Somewhere, it seems, the Ridiculous landscape might continue into the great beyond.

In true Ridiculous fashion, this moment is not left on a sentimental note. Rather,

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¹⁷ Peggy Shaw, Ruff, unpublished play script, 3–4.
¹⁸ Ibid., 28.
popular culture returns to have the last word on Shaw’s predicament. This use of a pop
culture joke somehow plays with great profundity. Shaw describes a character from
*South Park*, an animated television program, named Mr. Hindsight who “lists all the
things that could have been done to avert the tragedy in the first place.”\(^{19}\) Mr. Hindsight
is no Superman; he does not come in at the last minute and save everyone. Instead, he
explains how those about to die in a fire could have avoided that fate, if only there had
been a fire escape or a larger alleyway between buildings. The anecdote has a very
humorous quality—indeed, on the original television program on which it aired, it was
likely a solid punchline. In this play, however, it also manifests emotions about not only
the situation from the cartoon, but the larger issues surrounding crisis and mortality with
which Shaw has dealt throughout the performance. We never know what will happen
and only seem to have all the answers once tragedy has occurred.

Certainly there is a Ridiculous quality to what Shaw has created here, but in its
themes and meanings, this show suggests how elements derived from the Ridiculous
aesthetic can be used to get beyond mere Ridiculous mockery. Unlike many Ridiculous
companies and artists, the life and work of Split Britches has been covered in great detail
elsewhere.\(^{20}\) Therefore, I will not belabor outlining their extensive production history,
but simply link them to Ridiculous Theatre. Shaw, Weaver, and earlier contributor Deb
Margolin had a direct connection with the Ridiculous scene. They worked in the
Downtown Scene, like their Ridiculous contemporaries, at sites such as the WOW Café
Theatre, a theatre for women that was run as a collective. Although Hot Peaches is cited

\(^{19}\) Shaw, *Ruff*, 28.

\(^{20}\) For more on Split Britches, see books such as Sue-Ellen Case’s *Split Britches: Lesbian
by Alexis Clements in American Theatre magazine as Shaw’s practical start in queer theatre, Clements acknowledges that it was the theatre of Charles Ludlam that first turned Shaw on to the Downtown New York artistic scene. Clements writes, “After finishing a fine arts degree in Boston in 1967, she [Shaw] moved to New York City, where early on she was impressed by downtown impresario Charles Ludlam’s Bluebeard, mounted by his Ridiculous Theatrical Company.”

Shaw elucidated this history further, admitting, “I stumbled upon Ludlums [sic] work by mistake, and right after, Hot Peaches, a group I was a part of for many years. Ludlum [sic] was actually rather conventional theater in a way, not necessarily creating a questioning of gay as much as a venue for mostly gay men to theatricalise themselves without actually having a known gay consciousness.”

Although Shaw may have gotten her jumpstart from seeing Ludlam’s work, she was also able to recognize the limitations of those plays for her objectives and used her own work to expand the possibilities of this sort of performance.

Therefore, the plays of Split Britches show a Ridiculous aesthetic in their construction and presentation style, used in order to problematize issues of performativity, especially as they relate to gender. These plays emphasize performance over all—according to Clements, “Shaw and Weaver assert that theatrical rather than political concerns have always been foremost in their creative work,” while many scholars still highlight their dismissal of gender norms and traditional narrative structures as “a radical act.” Their 1991 play, Belle Reprieve, can be seen as a variety of

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22 Shaw, email, February 27, 2014.
23 Ibid., 77.
24 Ibid.
Ridiculous remix, filled with a blending of a canonical theatre text with many low culture references. The play also shows elements of gender mashup, including the practice of cross-dressing as an aesthetic and performative choice. As Mary F. Brewer puts it, “The work of Split Britches problematizes the concept of a single feminine or masculine gender.”

In Belle Reprieve, Shaw played the role of Stanley, for example, while the role of Blanche was played in drag as well. Of course, the title is a play on “Belle Reve,” the ancestral home of the DuBois women in Tennessee Williams’s classic, A Streetcar Named Desire. The play is preoccupied with film; Sue-Ellen Case argues, “Belle Reprieve is based on the film iconography of Streetcar, more than the script.”

This interest in Hollywood over theatre suggests a Ridiculous preference for the popular over the canonical, a nod to the reverence Jack Smith held for Maria Montez.

There is a violent undertone even in Williams’s original play—Blanche is raped after all—that Split Britches had to contend with in their more humorous interpretation. Case describes, “The cast stressed this attribute as specifically macho het-male, in its stereotypical representation.”

Here, we find the interest in exposing performative gender stereotypes being linked with some of the darker elements present in other Ridiculous plays, such as those of Ronald Tavel and Kenneth Bernard. In the work of Split Britches, we often see the post-Absurdist quality, which Tavel had previously argued for, reaching its apotheosis. These plays present the violent and cruel world in which human beings find themselves, only to approach that human condition with humor. In a play like Belle Reprieve, the only thing to do about our situation is to laugh at it.

25 Mary F. Brewer, Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Women’s Theatre, (Toronto, ON: Sussex Academic Press, 1999),160.
26 Case, Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/Feminist Performance, 27.
27 Ibid., 28.
Indeed, it would seem that in many ways the Ridiculous is alive and well in the New York theatre. Besides Split Britches, who are more direct adaptors of the form than inheritors, we can view many artists’ work through a Ridiculous lens. In a recent article by Sean Edgecomb in *Theatre Journal*, he makes a case for considering Taylor Mac a Ridiculous performer. Indeed, Edgecombe argues that we may be able to find the Ridiculous in more places than we initially realize. The Ridiculous has a rich legacy, made of those who it touched directly with its flamboyant aesthetic and those who seem to have discovered the work through their own experimental processes. In either case, it would seem that the Ridiculous has many inheritors, both direct from the period and beyond.

Yet, just because it seems to have an influence throughout the Downtown Scene, the Ridiculous has its critics, even from that territory. Certain contemporaries of the Ridiculous, even, find the work lacking in terms of a progressive “gay” or “queer” agenda. Medusa’s Revenge performer Ana Maria Simo, in the same discussion as the one in which RTC contributor Lola Pashalinski claimed political potential in aesthetic choices, states, “Where I was in 1981 had absolutely nothing to do with the Ridiculous Theatre in that I was never aware that the Ridiculous Theater was gay. To me, the Ridiculous Theater was a theater that was using a theatrical form that had always been used, which is, men in drag.” To some viewers, the Ridiculous is not all that radical, as

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it uses certain tropes that have existed in drama for centuries, as opposed to innovating new styles.

For artists of the same period and from the same so-called downtown “community,” the work of the Ridiculous can seem as mainstream as any other theatre work—not just those happening at the time, but throughout history. What then is the valence of a Ridiculous legacy? How is the potential radical quality of this work undercut by tracing its ubiquitousness? Does legacy improve the Ridiculous geography? Or does it somehow diminish it?

**Ludlam’s Followers: Charles Busch & Tony Kushner**

**Busch’s Ridiculous Theatre: *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom***

The Ridiculous has direct inheritors, that is, individuals who claim that Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous directly influenced their work. Charles Busch, for one, noted, “My life changed at that moment,” when he saw 1971’s *Eunuchs of the Forbidden City*, which he considered a “decadent, filthy play.” Busch told me, “I had never seen anything like that” which prompted thoughts of, “this is what theatre could be.” Because of this Busch “started seeing all of the [Ludlam] plays” and Ludlam became a key early influence on him.

Busch, therefore, began his theatrical career with Ludlam as his idol. Busch said, “I kind of wanted to emulate myself after Charles. That was kind of a fantasy of mine.” Based on his unsuccessful college acting career, Busch contemplated focusing on playwriting, while learning to embrace his own androgyny for purposes of performing. By seeking a performance path that allowed him to write roles that would work for his

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31 Ibid.
own particular skill set, Busch found that “Ludlam was a template, in a way, that I could maybe create my own career.” Busch also admits, “I didn’t want to be a member of his company. It meant a lot to me for him to think I was talented.”32 Because of this, Busch pursued performing his own solo work at Ludlam’s Sheridan Square space, though he did collaborate with Ludlam a few times during his career.

Yet, Busch notes, “It was never my dream to work with him.”33 Rather, Busch was interested in creating a place for himself in the downtown theatre community. Although he had these early connections with Ludlam and his company, Busch’s real entrée into the downtown scene would come later when he both accepted his talent for playing female roles and found the right sort of space for his voice to be heard. After performing solo works that read like “screenplays,” in which he wore neutral dress and played both male and female roles, he realized that “the sort of unspoken truth was that the female characters were by far the most successful.” Ludlam happened to be the one to articulate this reality to Busch by saying, “‘Why don’t you just play female characters? Why play men at all?’”34 After this, in 1984, Busch discovered the sort of space in which he wished to perform: the “after-hours bar/art gallery way down in Alphabet City, in the Lower East Side, the Limbo Lounge.” Busch recalled, “I was so entranced with this place, it felt like Berlin in the twenties…. It was sort of gay, but kind of straight, but kind of punk.”35 In addition, Busch recognized that this was the perfect time to get into the Lower East Side scene; “that neighborhood was so funky and mostly abandoned buildings and here and there there would be a kind of a very interesting theatre club or art

33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
gallery…. It was a very exciting area that we had discovered…. I was in the right place at the right time because Alphabet City, the East Village was suddenly rediscovered in the six months that I was there.”36 Because of his early encounters with the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, and because of his journeys performing throughout the landscape of the downtown scene, Busch would go on to adapt and expand Ridiculous Theatre, as a style and as a movement, with his own dramaturgical contributions.

Indeed, what could be more Ridiculous than a play entitled *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*? The title alone suggests that we are still clearly grounded in the age of Theatre of the Ridiculous. In “The Tale of Charles Busch,” Don Shewey narrates:

In the early 1980s, he [Busch] and director Kenneth Elliot assembled a loose company of performers who put on shows at an East Village nightclub called the Limbo Lounge. “I wrote according to what would be acceptable in that space,” Mr. Busch recalled. “We performed on an empty stage because we had no place to store furniture. And half the audience was standing up drinking beer, so you couldn’t do an elaborate two-act piece.”37

This sort of “make-do-with-what-you-have” theatre-making is much in line with what his Ridiculous contemporaries were doing (and, indeed, Ludlam was frustrated to see Busch making a play that seemed to plagiarize his own style).38 From one angle, what Busch was doing a clear continuation of Ridiculous theatre-making.

38 In his biography of Ludlam, David Kaufman narrates that after seeing *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, “Ludlam returned from the performance enraged, griping that
However, it is the differences between the plays of Ludlam and Busch that are most compelling, not their similarities. In a discussion of Busch’s *The Lady In Question* for the *New York Times*, Frank Rich points out both the connection and distinction between the two Charles’ bodies of work:

While Mr. Busch’s plays are often linked with Charles Ludlam’s lighter efforts, such generalizing distorts the artistry of both. Mr. Ludlam, a theatrical classicist and a political iconoclast, usually had a second agenda, ideological or esthetic percolating within his gender-flipped sendups. Mr. Busch’s attitude is the simpler one of “Hooray for Hollywood!” The man revels in trash. “The Lady in Question” mimics its source material so accurately and affectionately that it is as much homage as parody; the tone is closer to “Dames at Sea” or a Mel Brooks film than it is to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.39

Busch’s plays can be said to operate like his Ridiculous contemporaries’ efforts; they explore sexual polyvalence, they are episodic in nature, and they make jokes on subjects not usually the source of great comedy. Busch agrees that “all my genre parody plays that I’ve done over the next 30 years [since *Vampire Lesbians*] do owe a big debt to Charles, doing theatrical parody on the stage involving drag and pop culture references. He was the biggest stylistic influence on me” even though Busch “would like to think”

superficial elements of his work had indeed been stolen, but without any of their substance” (361).

that he has “developed his own voice” in the years since his interactions with the older Charles.  

However, just calling Busch’s plays “Ridiculous” is probably disingenuous to both his work and the term itself. Busch’s work, according to Rich, lacks the edge of mockery present in Ludlam’s plays. Without this quality, in Rich’s estimation, there is no radical statement being made. Yet, Busch did not see Ludlam’s work as political; he “would read these reviews and think, ‘What Ludlam are they inventing?’ They were saying that I lacked the political edge of Charles Ludlam and I thought, ‘political, really? What political edge did he have?’ I didn’t think he had a political agenda.” Busch sees the difference between his plays and those of Ludlam as having its basis in the “physical” differences between himself and Ludlam as performers, especially since Busch has “almost exclusively” performed drag roles whereas Ludlam more often performed male roles. Busch noted, “I always looked really beautiful in drag…. I could look like the ladies that I was emulating.” Because of this, he did not need to draw the kind of attention to the gender performance that Ludlam and others had to in their “stylized performances,” like “Camille with the hairy chest,” in order to make the performance work. Busch could do a realistic impersonation; Ludlam found other modes for using gender performance in his plays.

_Vampire Lesbians_, the play Busch created to get his foot in the door at the Limbo Lounge, is clearly a Ridiculous play. It was first performed in 1984 and, like its Ridiculous contemporaries, mocks surrounding culture while continuing to refuse to take

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
itself seriously. Madeleine states, “As my dear friend Gertrude Stein says, ‘My mystery is a mystery is a mystery,’” a seemingly high culture reference. Oatsie’s response? “Hmmm. I wonder if any man has ever pierced your enigma” (70). Rather than taking this high avant-garde poetry reference seriously, it is dismissed with a dirty joke, couched in a double entendre, one that also pokes fun at the original poet’s presumed sexuality. In Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, nothing is to be taken seriously. Even when ritual is performed, to exorcise the vampires, it is not the reverent affair of a Jack Smith production; it is an event as open to mockery as any other, not a sacred staging, like even Smith’s penguin funeral might have been.44 When in danger of being attacked by jungle sorcery, La Condesa accepts her fate, poking fun at the whole procedure. “So what do you expect me to do, scream, run around in circles?” she asks. “Do it, get out your voodoo dolls. This modern world stinks. Broadway’s dead. My apartment is going co-op, you can’t get a decent bialy. I’ve had it. Give me the jungle phase out. You’ll be doing me a favor.”45 The ritual is not a reverent site; it is merely another ridiculous means to an end.

Indeed, the performative quality of Vampire Lesbians is not to be ignored, as is the case for all Ridiculous Theatre. For example, in addition to being an aspect of the production style, cross-dressing emerges as a theme in the play. As we find in Eichelberger’s gender mashups, gender construction is a complicated process. In the second scene, we have a male character, who may have been a woman, who is then forbidden from wearing panties (74). Gender is layered here while also being unreliable

44 See Sally Banes, “Junk Alchemy” for a description of this piece.
45 Charles Busch, Vampire Lesbians of Sodom and Sleeping Beauty or Coma, (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1985), 81. All subsequent references to the play will be made parenthetically.
as a marker of identity. In that same scene, it is revealed that the King (also a term for a woman who dresses up and performs as a man) is not who he says he is; according to Madeleine his “real name is Trixie Monahan and five years ago the coppers tossed you in the sex tank for impersonating a woman” (68). Although the King maintains that, “Drag is a perfectly legitimate theatrical tradition,” (68) it has no place in this early twentieth-century Hollywood setting. Drag, as a performance practice, has attention drawn to it, so that it can be spurned with the same vigor as anything else while still being implemented within the play itself: a complex Ridiculous remix construction.

On the one hand, as can be seen, *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* seems to sum up many of the themes and motifs associated with the Ridiculous Theatre. We find double entendres, references to surrounding culture, non-linear structure, and a preoccupation with forms of popular entertainment, both in the play’s structure and content. Yet the play also seems to use those techniques because the Ridiculous style had emerged as a marketable format for producing theatre in the downtown scene. As Rich noted of *The Lady in Question*, the development of Busch’s plays is less in line with Ludlam’s so-called “ridiculosity” (to borrow Rick Roemer’s term), and more of a tribute to mainstream entertainment forms, like mad-cap comedies and large-scale musical films. The entry describing Busch’s work in *Contemporary Gay American Poets and Playwrights: An A-to-Z Guide* elucidates the distinction between Ludlam and Busch well: “Unlike Charles Ludlam’s rather highbrow references, absurdist tone, and politically charged drag, Busch shoots for the true subject matter of camp: B movies. His drag

46 Roemer explores this term in *Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company*.
characters bring to life the glorious stars of old.”

Although this entry highlights the differences as a positive in Busch’s favor—he is more of a “true” camp performer—ultimately the difference is in the politically subversive quality. In his intellectualism, Ludlam is able to create larger commentary about drag through his drag performances, while Busch is performing within the great drag tradition.

**Busch’s Later Work**

_Vampire Lesbians of Sodom_ clearly shows how Busch began his career within the Ridiculous landscape. However, unlike many other Ridiculous playwrights, Busch continues to write plays in the contemporary moment. His 2012 production _Judith of Bethulia_ possesses many similarities to the earlier _Vampire Lesbians:_ it is epic in scope and episodic in structure, it includes both drag performing and cross-dressing within the drama, and it remixes some cultural references from the popular with its larger biblical framework. The back cover of the Samuel French edition asks the reader to “Imagine the outrageous Mae West in a Cecil B. DeMille biblical epic.” The entire play takes this as its mindset, it seems. On the one hand, it tells the tale of the heroine Judith in her pursuit to help the Jewish people while on the other it is a Ridiculous homage to Hollywood cinema and the power of the double entendre.

Again, gender mashup exists both within the story itself as well as in the production elements. Busch played the title role in drag when it was performed at Theater for the New City. In his cast list, he also notes, “This play can be double cast, as

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well as cross-gender cast.” Yet Busch takes the play with gender a step further, allowing characters within the drama to knowingly don the garb of the opposite sex. Urdamani, a eunuch, decides to enter the city in a female disguise. When his master Holofernes questions this choice and its minimally successful execution, Urdamani admits, “Your Highness, there is much I can learn from you of being a man and a woman” (9). On paper, it is often difficult to ascertain characters’ genders simply by reading what is happening in the play. This is a production meant to draw attention to the performative nature of gender identity, especially in its inclusion of a eunuch character: a clear example of what might be considered a “third sex,” neither completely male nor female.

This concept, one that is more deeply explored in John Cameron Mitchell’s *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, comes into play later in the drama. As is the case in *Vampire Lesbians*, much of the action of the play indulges in bawdy humor, as many Ridiculous comedies do. Urdamani bemoans having lost his genitalia, “My sacrifice has left me with a mound as bare as the vast desert, with no oasis to provide pleasure. I’ve an uncomfortable itch to scratch. I, who possess neither penis nor snatch” (42). Like Mitchell’s earlier musical, this discussion suggests that a gender binary is insufficient for categorizing all of humankind, but couches that discussion in a dirty poem, making for a fun blend of a serious issue and an immature joke. This recent play shows a real Ridiculous commitment to sexual humor and the off-color as not only a key source of humor but also as an important element of the plot structure.

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49 Busch, *Judith of Bethulia*, 5. All subsequent references to the play will be made parenthetically.
This play is not, however, as clear an example of Ridiculous remix as some of Busch’s other works are, yet its title is borrowed from a 1914 D. W. Griffith film. There are references to popular culture—the Hollywood motif and the invocation of actress West being the clearest—but this is not a collage-style play, meant to invoke the ghosts of the cultural past. References in Busch’s plays tend to be a bit more obscure, though this may be due to the fact that many of them are two generations or more removed from their contemporary audiences. Despite being more of an original scripted comedy, one of the most obvious acts of quotation occurs between the two young lovers, the former prostitute Naomi and the virginal Nathan. To his beloved, Nathan says, “Softer than starlight are you. Warmer than winds of June are the gentle lips you gave me” (33), clearly lyrics from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s musical South Pacific. This seems a particularly postmodern gesture of Ridiculous remix; it suggests that love is so humorous that it must always be discussed via quotation. This interest in phrases meant to be said with quotation marks around them extends beyond merely quoting from outside material. Naomi and Nathan share double entendres with one another to avoid actually having to say words like “sex” (36). Even in this more recent play, Busch is still working within a Ridiculous aesthetic.

Before he began writing plays like Judith of Bethulia for the new downtown scene, Busch had made a mainstream impact in the theatre. From his perhaps inauspicious beginnings in the downtown club scene, Busch would emerge as one of the brightest and best-known theatre writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. This was due in large part to his Tale of the Allergist’s Wife (2000), which was nominated for a 2001 Tony Award for Best Play. In his New York Times review, cultural
arbiter Ben Brantley declares, “Mr. Busch, it would seem, has swum straight into the mainstream.” For Brantley, one of the most notable aspects of this production is the choice for Busch not to portray Marjorie himself; i.e., for this not to be a drag performance. Brantley suggests, “Real women, after all, can be just as self-dramatizing as drag queens; they just tend (for the most part) to look less like cartoons.”50 Yet without the presence of cross-dressing, this production loses a key link to its Ridiculous ancestry.

For John Simon, writing in New York, this break with its Downtown Scene past is exactly what makes The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife worth seeing. Simon writes in his introduction to his review, “Who would have expected from a campy downtown playwright a nicely structured, intelligently funny, satirically relevant uptown comedy?”51 Clearly, Simon is forgetting Ludlam’s late plays, such as Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde, which are also tightly-plotted, with more highbrow references than lowbrow ones. Still, Busch’s twenty-first-century play is remarkable in that it moved an almost entirely Downtown Scene playwright and performer into the limelight of Broadway. Busch made the transition that Ludlam did not live long enough to do on his own; he took the Ridiculous aesthetic and adapted it tremendously so that it might sell to a large-scale, mainstream, commercial audience.

The Allergist’s Wife, more tightly structured and seemingly realistic than Busch’s earlier works, centers on a loose domestic drama about a married couple and the wife’s

long-lost friend Lillian, now called Lee. Lee brings out secret desires among the family, both for illicit sexual affairs and also for high culture. This blending of high culture references into a comedic play might suggest something Ridiculous. Certainly, this play is episodic and disavows traditional plot progression. Despite this seemingly Ridiculous construction, the play is more heavily marked with highbrow references than with popular or low cultural ones and ultimately is less a Ridiculous remix than a boilerplate drawing room comedy in a mildly absurdist vein.

This absurdist quality is critical to making sense of this play’s construction. Dialogue often seems to be organized around non-sequiturs. Because of this structural conceit, one of the most telling literary references in the play is to *Waiting for Godot*. Marjorie fears because “We’re Russian peasants from the shtetl!” that she and her husband have no right to take in so much high culture. Ira dismisses this complaint, claiming, “You know, that last production of ‘Waiting for Godot’ affected me deeply. I had a sense that I finally understood what that play was about” (276). But Marjorie cannot accept Ira’s statement; she mocks him, saying:

You understood the story. You think it’s about two guys who get stranded by the Tappan Zee Bridge. They’re not waiting for Triple A. It’s about—I can’t even explain what it’s about. That is my conundrum. I don’t understand the play any better than you. I’m a fraud. A cultural poseur. To quote Kafka, “I am a cage in search of a bird.” (276)

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52 Charles Busch, *The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife* in *The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 276. All subsequent references to the play will be made parenthetically.
This allusion to a classic work of the Theatre of the Absurd does not seem out of place in this drama, one whose dialogue comes across in much the same manner as spoken text in a Eugene Ionesco play might: random topics followed to an illogical conclusion and then traded for the next viable topic of discussion. For example, this discussion of the meaning of esoteric works of art is immediately followed by an exclamation of hunger and a reference to Entenmann’s, a commercial consumer product.

This seeming Ridiculous remix behavior does not have the same quality as similar references made in a Tavel or Ludlam play, however. Rather, Ira and Marjorie’s argument throws into relief the importance here of making meaning out of a work of art and how, when one fails to do so, one can also fail to be an actual intellectual. Understanding high art matters here, probably more than understanding popular iconography like an Entenmann’s label. No longer could a Ban deodorant slogan outrank Shakespeare; one must be an insider to the top echelon of culture to matter in the world of *The Allergist’s Wife*.

Indeed, such literary references as this Beckett discussion are rampant in this drama. When describing her own failed attempt at literary greatness, for instance, Marjorie refers to her work as “phantasmagoria,” “heavily influenced by Thomas Pynchon,” “composed as verse drama,” containing “chapters in various historical periods,” including characters such as “Plato and Helen Keller” as well as “allusions to ‘Anna Karenina’” (286). Of course, on one level this laundry listing of high concept literary references is used as a Ridiculous sort of mockery of the literary process, high literary genres, and intellectualism as a hobby. Yet, Marjorie ends this ranting description with, “I was attempting to break away from conventional narrative structure”
This idea seems in line with both an Absurdist construction as well as a Ridiculous one. In both cases, we have dramatic literature forms that reimagine what narrative can be. In the Absurd, it is a lack of narrative development that marks the genre; in the Ridiculous, it is an almost overabundance of narrative elements that are at work to create the overall production. The inclusion of the concept of a form of structure here suggests that this idea—reimaging how to organize a play—is as ridiculous a concept as any other. The merit of this practice, one not fully implemented here, is undercut by these characters’ dismissal of it. Marjorie sees her Ridiculous remix work as “tangible proof of my own mediocrity” (286), allowing commercial failure to distinguish it as unworthy of being read.

In this slew of referencing, even the Pop Art scene, in which the original Ridiculous landscape was so clearly grounded, makes an appearance. Lee, a true cultured woman of the world, claims to have known Andy Warhol in her more bohemian days. She relates, “He [Warhol] used to come over and we’d share a can of soup. He got such a kick out of the way I used to pile the empty Campbell soup cans on top of each other. I guess you could say, I planted a little seed” (290–91). Lee is implying here that she actually served as the impetus for Warhol’s groundbreaking work of Pop Art expression. In addition, though, the fact that Marjorie seems impressed that Lee knew Warhol suggests that he, too, now belongs in the category of high art references. Here, Busch is drawing direct attention to the Ridiculous lineage, showing how it might now be considered high art form.

*The Tale of the Allergist’s Wife* seems to be precisely the sort of play that Lee would have abhorred; one highbrow enough, because of its “downtown”-leaning
playwright and its references to Warhol and literature, to appeal to a cultural elite, while not being challenging enough, in either content or structure, to alienate a wider Broadway clientele. Indeed the most scandalous topic, besides the sexual relations between Marjorie, Lee, and Ira, is Marjorie’s mother, Frieda’s, suppositories. These are neither relevant to the overarching linear plot nor bizarre enough to be truly Ridiculous. They are like a remnant of a Ridiculous aesthetic in a play that is not, overall, a work of Ridiculous Theatre.

Yet Busch’s most recent play, 2014’s *The Tribute Artist*, pays homage to his Ridiculous ancestry both in its construction and content; it and *Judith of Bethulia* seem more deeply committed to Busch’s Ridiculous heritage than his Broadway play. *The Tribute Artist* uses cross-dressing as the main dramatic throughline; a man, Jimmy, who plays female roles is forced to don female garb long-term in order to fulfill a convoluted real estate scheme. Despite only being a cross-dressed performer, because of the nature of the events that this play presents, the audience never sees him in anything but female attire. The play opens with him trying on clothes that belong to Adriana, his elderly landlady, for fun and then turns to more serious cross-dressing: becoming a woman in order to become rich.

Jimmy is the titular “tribute artist”; he has made his career impersonating the same catalog of great twentieth-century film actresses as the Ridiculous performers of the previous generations had. His adamant dismissal of the term “drag queen”—he tells his friends, “I don’t wear women’s wigs in real life” and “I recreate legendary female
performers. I’m an illusionist. I don’t do this for fun. I’m a professional entertainer\textsuperscript{53}—suggests that he is aware of the performative nature of gender but also of the connotations that come along with accepting that fact. To this point, he has only performed female roles; he has never before become an actual woman.

The interest here is less in the crossing of gender and more in the particular types of women that Jimmy portrays. He does impersonations of a particular generation of female stars, one that has less and less relevance to the Las Vegas audiences to which Jimmy still plays. All of Jimmy’s references are dated; his cultural allusions seem more in line with the Ridiculous crowd of Ludlam’s time than with contemporary audiences. He bemoans, “There is no longer any place for Jimmy Nichols in the Flamingo Hotel’s Boys Will Be Girls Revue. I should have seen the writing on the wall. Last year, both my Julie Andrews and Charo were cut. Finally, I was just left with Marilyn. She is my masterpiece but most of that Vegas crowd just thinks I’m doing Christina Aguilera. Everything’s fallen apart since this new producer took over. He’s a kid. He’s forty years old” (6). Someone who is forty would not be nostalgic for the 1950s; his set of references would be from a later decade. Like Eichelberger’s Dasvedanya Mama, Busch’s play is aware that this mode of performing may be a dying form.

However, what The Tribute Artist does show is that gender performance is a more relevant aspect of human existence than perhaps ever before. We do not see Jimmy play any role other than Adriana, his recently deceased landlady and friend. And he does not play her merely as tribute; he fully becomes Adriana, assuming her vocal patterns, wigs, and wardrobes, as well as all of her personal history. This sort of gender performance

\textsuperscript{53} Charles Busch, The Tribute Artist, 2014, unpublished script courtesy of Busch, 5. All subsequent references to the play will be made parenthetically.
suggests something much deeper about the performative nature of identity than simply playing at being famous starlets. Yet, Jimmy’s interpretation of women cannot help but be shaded by his knowledge of famous female stars. His recreation of Adriana is both an honest rendering and proof that the surrounding culture and its archetypes always influence assuming a gender.

The interest in pursuing a deeper contemplation of the performance of self and its relation to gender is further emphasized through the inclusion of the deceased homeowner’s grandnephew, an individual who is in the process of transitioning from female to male. Oliver, born Rachel, suggests gender performance is something of much more significance than merely drag performance. Oliver clearly identifies with his in-process state, telling his mother, “I’m not a tomboy. I’m a transman” (21). Yet, Oliver is also comfortable with the ambiguities of gender, declaring, “And I’m gonna continue to do that as I become more comfortable with myself. I’m not ruling out a touch of androgyny. I just might surprise you one day by wearing a skirt” and then clarifies by saying, “More like a kilt” (21). Oliver understands that one’s gender identity is a complicated notion and his representation, more so than Jimmy’s impersonation of Adriana, displays the progression of our understanding of a gender spectrum, not a dichotomy.

The inclusion of these extended universe characters, such as Adriana’s grandnephew and his mother as well as the deceased’s former lover Rodney, in addition to the central figures of Jimmy and his best friend, Rita, hearkens back to the kind of parade of crazy characters that Ludlam constructed in How to Write a Play. The plot—a seemingly straightforward bait and switch in which Jimmy pretends to be the deceased
Adriana until Rita can sell the apartment and they can abscond with the profits—is continually complicated by the web of interactions among this cast of characters. Yet, this play is also a conventional kind of farce; cross-dress is used to achieve a goal and is often the source of humor. It is perhaps more similar to *Love, Sex and the I.R.S.*, a 1979 play by Billy Van Zandt and Jane Milmore, in which a young man must pretend to be his male roommate’s wife to further his tax evasion scheme, than like Eichelberger’s *Minnie the Maid* or Jack Smith’s loft performances. Cross-dressing is used to achieve a particular goal, not because of a commitment to exposing issues related to gender performance. In an interview with Michael Riedel and Susan Haskins for CUNY TV’s program “Theater Talk,” Busch admits that this was entirely the point:

I’ve done so many plays where I just played the female character, the leading lady role and I’ve always thought it would be kind of fun to do a *Some Like It Hot / Tootsie* kind of story where a fellow actually is impersonating a woman. I thought it would be kind of interesting to see well, what could I bring to that very old convention… through my experiences, first of all being a gay man and being a professional female impersonator.  

Because of Busch’s unique perspective on this part, this is a much more thoughtful rendering of the cross-dressing plot than other similar dramas. The dramatic irony of the play—that the audience knows the woman is actually a man—serves as the source of most of the humor in both plays.

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54 “The Tribute Artist / Almost, Maine,” Interview with Charles Busch and Julie Halston for “Theater Talk” with Michael Riedel and Susan Haskins, CUNY TV, February 8, 2014.
Still, overall, the play relies on its Ridiculous roots for both its most humorous lines and its most emotional moments. In terms of the humor, double entendres abound. For example, when Adriana asks Jimmy, “Do you receive a form of sexual gratification from dressing in women’s clothes? The soft fabrics? The close fitting garments?” Jimmy cries, “No! This is just what I do best. Like juggling. You don’t ask a juggler if he finds his balls sexually stimulating. Bad example” (8). The dirty bit of humor undercuts the serious discussion of the justification for drag. Similarly, when the plot goes awry and Jimmy’s secret is revealed, rather than relying on the emotional connections that he has built with Adriana’s relatives to save him, he falls back on his tribute artist routines. Rita must make him promise, “Are you really crying? You’re not doing Meryl Streep or Margaret O’Brien, are you?” (96), and even after doing so, he cannot keep to his word. Even though Jimmy begs, “please don’t call me a drag queen” (5), he cannot help but fall into these Ridiculous routines. Writing for the New York Post, Frank Scheck finds “Jimmy delivering a series of comic references to old movies that Rita’s forced to explain to those too young to have seen them” to be the play’s “funniest” moment.55 The Ridiculous elements are still what shines in a Busch production.

Indeed, like so many of his Ridiculous predecessors, Busch is accused by Variety reviewer Marilyn Stasio of creating a play, “strictly for the in crowd.”56 The Ridiculous may still be alive and well in the theatre, but it may still be for a particular audience only, no matter its prevalence. Yet, this play still seems much more accessible than earlier Ridiculous plays, even Busch’s own Vampire Lesbians of Sodom. In the “Theater Talk”

discussion, Busch refers to this play as a kind of “middleground between my camp movie genre spoofs and then my sentimental Jewish comedies, like The Allergist’s Wife because it’s kind of a naturalistic play.”\(^57\) This play suggests a Ridiculous remixing of Busch’s own style, bringing in his interest in the mainstream theatre with his Ridiculous ancestry. Scheck refers to The Tribute Artist as “a minor effort to be sure. But even a lesser Busch is more.”\(^58\) Busch has brought the Ridiculous into the twenty-first century, but the form has definitely had to adapt to the more mainstream theatre houses in which it now plays. In creating this play, Busch also wanted to construct a piece that would have the potential to fulfill a “dream of mine to act on Broadway.” In so doing, he imagined, “What kind of play could I write that would put me over?” He saw that this play “might be more commercial than some movie pastiche piece with me in drag,”\(^59\) although it has yet to be transferred to Broadway. Busch is explicitly continuing the pursuit of taking Ridiculous Theatre onto mainstream stages.

**Kushner’s Theatre of the Fabulous: Angels in America**

More complicated still in terms of the connection of his plays with the Ridiculous scene that he claims inspired them is Tony Kushner who, in his introduction to the still-in-print Ludlam edition The Mystery of Irma Vep and Other Plays, pays tribute to his theatrical hero. Kushner reminisces, “I had a mad crush on Charles Ludlam.”\(^60\) Kushner then walks the reader through his numerous encounters with the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, never losing his wistful, nostalgic tone. This is clearly work for which he

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\(^{57}\) “The Tribute Artist / Almost, Maine,” Interview with Charles Busch and Julie Halston for “Theater Talk” with Michael Riedel and Susan Haskins, CUNY TV, February 8, 2014.

\(^{58}\) Scheck, “A Way with Women,” 34.

\(^{59}\) Busch, interview, March 3, 2014.

cared deeply and an artistic influence that he tries to incorporate within his own dramatic creations.

Kushner draws a direct link between the work he saw at sites like One Sheridan Square and his own dramatic practice. He suggests that from this admiration for Ludlam and the Ridiculous came the next tradition in gay theatre, which he calls “Theatre of the Fabulous.” Kushner sees “fabulousness” as the style toward which gay and lesbian drama is moving in a post-Ridiculous world. He writes, “If the great antecedent form of gay theater was theater of the ridiculous, then the new theater that… all of us who are lesbian and gay and working in theater now are creating is something that I’m calling ‘theater of the fabulous.”’

In “Thinking about Fabulousness,” a conversation with novelist Michael Cunningham, Kushner notes a concept that is very close to Ridiculous ideology. He states, “Theater is as much a part of trash culture as it is high art…. And it’s incredibly important for people who are working in theater to always remember that it’s show biz and it’s sort of sleazy, and… a lot of the ways that you have at your disposal for telling a story are ways that were developed by, incredibly, sort of lowbrow, popular entertainment.” This clearly explicates how the Fabulous builds on the Ridiculous; it also recognizes the value of using the lowbrow elements in the production of theatre.

Kushner draws a line from Ludlam’s work to his own contemporary dramas, stating, “Our great antecedent is Charles Ludlam… who was, in addition to being the funniest man who ever lived and a brilliant consumer and regurgitator of theatrical style

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62 Ibid., 63.
and legend, the founder and chief arbitrator of the Theater of the Ridiculous.”63 For Kushner, with the Ridiculous as a “great antecedent,” “‘theater of the fabulous’… [includes] an issue of investiture, that you become powerful because you believe yourself to be. In a certain sense, the people in the theater are all fabulous at the moment that Prior [the protagonist of Angels in America], who has become invested by the audience with a moral authority and a kind of prophetic voice, blesses everybody—they’re fabulous, whether they want to be or not.”64 Kushner is saying that in the Theatre of the Fabulous, there is meant to be a real connection between what happens on stage and what the audience is meant to do in the actual world. In the Ridiculous, a spectator might only be confronted with the silliness and failure of the surrounding culture to best express their community’s view of issues and circumstances. But Kushner asks his audiences to take something away from the theatrical experience and, as they might after attending an Epic Theatre production by Brecht or Erwin Piscator, use that information to interpret and affect the world around them. To be Fabulous, then, is not just to laugh at the world, but to engage in the “Great Work,” to riff on Prior’s blessing, that must occur in the world. Because of this, as in Prior’s final blessing, there is an active and activist quality to the plays. In both Angels in America and A Bright Room Called Day, there is a sense that bearing witness to the play is not enough; something must be done with that information.

Kushner has been creating work in a very different climate than the one in which Ludlam worked, yet he sees the trajectory from the raucous and irreverent, politically charged 1960s to the world of AIDS crisis America in the 1980s and its aftermath in the

64 Ibid., 74.
In a way, it is impossible to discuss the Ridiculous without reflecting on the toll the AIDS epidemic took on the movement. Indeed, it is likely that one reason Ridiculous Theatre is often overlooked in American Theatre Studies is the fact that, at the height of their productivity, many of greatest artists associated with the Ridiculous were victims of AIDS. Of course, nowhere is this effect clearer than in the case of Charles Ludlam, but Jack Smith died from complications from AIDS and Ethyl Eichelberger committed suicide before the virus could take his life from him. In a sense, discussing the legacy of the Ridiculous is only essential because of the toll that AIDS wrought; if Ludlam, for one, had lived, it is certainly possible that the movement as he participated in it would have moved uptown itself, rather than leaving that journey for theatre work created by those who were inspired by him.

AIDS became a great source for dramatic production in its own right. Plays from Larry Kramer’s emotionally melodramatic *The Normal Heart* to Jonathan Larson’s heavily commercial Broadway musical *Rent* took up the crisis as subject matter. Perhaps no AIDS play became more famous or influential than Kushner’s “Gay Fantasia on National Themes,” *Angels in America* (1993). The play won consecutive Tony Awards for Best Play (each part being awarded in its year of premiere) and a Pulitzer Prize, and continues to be one of the most celebrated recent American plays. Kushner’s play has now been accepted to the American theatrical canon. A 2010 production at the Signature Theatre played to sold-out crowds for months. In his positive, if slightly underwhelmed, *New York Times* review of the production, Ben Brantley notes:

We’ve grown accustomed to the theatrical audacity and intellectual reach of this study of the intersection of personal, political and cosmic crises in the early days
of the AIDS epidemic. The play has never left our cultural consciousness. It is performed regularly in schools and local theaters; it is on the syllabuses of university English and drama classes, and the star-filled 2003 HBO adaptation, directed by Mike Nichols, is in many a home-video library.65

*Angels in America* is now a familiar work, one that reflects on the past as opposed to confronting its audiences with the realities of the present.

When the show first opened it was something of a theatrical revelation. In a review longer than the average reflection on a theatre piece, Frank Rich attempts to give a reader a sense of what it will be like to see Part One of Kushner’s epic, entitled *Millennium Approaches*, while admitting that such a feat may be impossible unless one has seen the show. I quote Rich at length, as his praise helped to create the undeniable significance of the play. Rich lauds:

> “Angels in America” is a work that never loses its wicked sense of humor or its wrenching grasp on such timeless dramatic matters as life, death and faith even as it ranges through territory as far-flung as the complex, plague-ridden nation Mr. Kushner wishes both to survey and to address. Subtitled “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,” the play is a political call to arms for the age of AIDS, but it is no polemic. Mr. Kushner’s convictions about power and justice are matched by his conviction that the stage, and perhaps the stage alone, is a space large enough to accommodate everything from precise realism to surrealistic hallucination, from black comedy to religious revelation. In “Angels in America,” a true

American work in its insistence on embracing all possibilities in art and life, he makes the spectacular case that they can all be brought into fusion in one play.\textsuperscript{66} In what Rich earlier refers to as “the most thrilling American play in years,” there are all of the qualities I have associated with the Ridiculous: a polyvalent approach to gender identity and sexuality; the raising of spirits and ghosts for worship and interaction; and a blending of both the political and the popular, high culture and low. In including many of the key aesthetic elements that I associate with the Ridiculous, one could call \textit{Angels in America}, if not a Ridiculous play, then certainly a play created with a reverence for the Ridiculous dramaturgy.

Without belaboring either the plot or the extensive production history of this important play, it is worth noting some ways in which it overlaps with the larger Ridiculous aesthetic. It involves the evoking of spirits and angels—quite literally—as well as Ridiculous remix, constructed of a slew of popular culture and high culture references, ranging in subject matter from \textit{Come Back, Little Sheba} to \textit{The Wizard of Oz} to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Cross-dressing is also present; the same woman who plays a mother and Ethel Rosenberg also dons the garb of a male rabbi. Yet, this is not quite gender mashup; the journeys across the gender divide are meant to be believable and complete. In all of this, we find the evocation of the ghosts of a haunted stage, a remixing and blending of highbrow and popular culture alike, and a configuration of gender that is, if not mashed up, then certainly on some level

performative: all aspects that can be associated with the Ridiculous. Despite these loose connections, it would be a stretch to ground this play in the Ridiculous landscape. *Angels in America* more clearly evokes the effect of the Ridiculous on Kushner’s playwriting than stands as an example of Ridiculous Theatre.

Kushner’s plays seem preoccupied with something larger than just aesthetic concerns. Although *Angels in America*, constructed of two multi-act plays that take over seven hours to perform in their entirety, has a grand epic structure, the larger themes of the play, such as religion and faith, personal journeys, disease and suffering, seem much more in tune with political drama than farce. Even though humor is a present force throughout the drama, the overall production does not come across as ridicule in the same way that a Ridiculous play on dark subject matter, such as *The Magic Show of Dr. Magico*, might. Thus, despite many light moments in the two-part work, the overall piece is still a serious play, not a mockery of the surrounding culture on which it comments. *Angels in America* does not possess the clever humor of Ludlam’s and other Ridiculous playwright’s works.

**Kushner as Political Playwright**

Even *Angels in America*, although magical and imaginative and calling for some level of cross-dress, is too realistic of a play and too tightly scripted of a drama to be “Ridiculous” in the way the works of Tavel and Smith are. Many of the characters are meant to be real people engaging in real world challenges and meeting or failing to meet those callings, facing whatever consequences come their way. And despite its dream-like quality, and its acceptance of the presence of angels and an afterlife, it is neither a Smithian ritual, with its demand for audience participation, nor a nightmarish carnival through the darker aspects of the human psyche, as a Kenneth Bernard play might be. We might
use Kushner’s term, “Fabulous” to describe it, but this would still be a development from the Ridiculous, not an example of it. According to Ken Neilsen, “Fabulous in one sense evolves beyond ridiculous in the way that fabulous becomes a rejection of the weakness inherent in being stigmatized as ridiculous. Fabulous rejects being perceived as weak or suffering in relation to oppression.”

In a sense, Fabulous adds a politically active quality to the Ridiculous; there is no longer acceptance of being the butt of a joke. Rather, there is delight and celebration in spite of it. Indeed, _Angels in America_ is a Fabulous construction by all possible interpretations of the term. This play includes such a spectacular _coup-de-theatre_ as an angel crashing through the ceiling at the end of its first part while also allowing its protagonist to journey to and through heaven, which is both a paradise and warzone.

The “Fabulous” quality of _Angels in America_, ultimately, serves a real-world function, to show (as Prior contends at the play’s conclusion) that life still has value and that there is something more to existence than suffering. Prior states, “This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won’t die secret deaths anymore.”

Theatre of the Fabulous goes beyond Theatre of the Ridiculous because it already accepts that although life might be worthy of being mocked there is still something much more magical about it than that. Life is something worth fighting for and fighting is a key aspect of what it means to be alive.

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68 Tony Kushner, _Angels in America_ (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 280.
Kushner’s plays should be seen as building on the work of Ludlam, acknowledging his influence but moving in a new direction. Ludlam saw his work as moving beyond the minimalism of Beckett and Kushner seems to move beyond the mockery of the Ridiculous. Kushner is always making a larger, if not political then certainly social, comment in his plays. He wants to show his audiences not only that they can laugh at life, as they might learn from watching a Ludlam farce, but also that they can embrace it and enjoy it. This celebratory perspective elucidates what is meant by Theatre of the Fabulous, though it does not quite extend to all of Kushner’s oeuvre.

Many of Kushner’s plays are, in fact, explicitly and directly political. In contrast to the more magical Angels in America, which does perhaps show the influence of Ludlam and the rest of the Ridiculous scene, consider Kushner’s early play, A Bright Room Called Day (1985). Like Angels in America, the play is sprawling and epic in its structure, but it is much more grounded in its own political ideology than the later play is. A Bright Room Called Day, which was Kushner’s first full-length play, is far more explicitly political than Angels in America—it proposes a particular “right” course of action and way of thinking while Angels in America attempts to lay out various perspectives simultaneously, albeit with an emphasis on a particular point of view—and had a much more difficult time getting good critical reviews. In drama, it would seem that it is a challenge to be both politically committed and dramatically entertaining simultaneously.

Bright Room presents a series of scenes, organized with slide projections and direct audience address to highlight the alienation effect. The action is centered on a

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group of individuals under threat of Nazism in Weimar Germany. The protagonist is a woman named Agnes Eggling, and the events of the drama transpire in her apartment. Zillah, a contemporary figure, interrupts the German drama to reflect on the connections between the Weimar period and the America of the play’s current moment. The great conflict in the play is about what to do regarding Hitler and the rise of Fascism. Zillah attempts to parallel this with the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. Bright Room is not a celebratory or triumphant story; in the end, these characters who have hid together are forced to go off and make their ways in the dangerous world on their own.

Kushner’s contention that 1980s America and 1930s Germany are somehow parallel was at the heart of the negative critical response to the play. To open his review of the 1991 New York Shakespeare Festival production, Frank Rich writes, “Perhaps if the world were not actually on the brink of war, ‘A Bright Room Called Day,’ a fatuous new drama about a world on the brink of war, would not be an early frontrunner for the most infuriating play of 1991. But then again, is the time ever right for a political work in which the National Socialism of the Third Reich is trivialized by being equated with the ‘national senility’ of the Reagan era?” Rich had a great deal of difficulty with the heavy-handed political point of view of the play. Additionally, he finds the comparison that Kushner draws between Fascism and Reaganism entirely inappropriate, and borderline offensive. The review is preoccupied entirely with the distastefulness of the play’s political content.

The discomfort caused by the play’s overwhelming political nature extends throughout the critical reception from when it first opened. David Richards’s review, also for the *New York Times*, is concerned less with the potential offensiveness of this connection. Rather, Richards addresses the fact that the connection between the two eras seems too weak to make any impact. Richards describes, “Mr. Kushner is willing to settle for the ironic juxtaposition of two worlds on the assumption that sparks will automatically leap back and forth. They don’t. Side by side is not a dramatic stance; face to face is. It’s not enough to have Zillah draw parallels between reactionary Germany then and reactionary America now. If the play is to be theatrically valid, we should see the idea dawning and understand what’s brought it about.”71 Kushner may (or may not) have made a valid political statement in this play’s interwoven storylines, but, according to these reviewers, he has not done a good enough job in justifying that political standpoint to make it come across as having validity for an audience.

According to critical reception, then, it seems to be the inclusion of specific, explicit political content that is the flaw in a work such as *A Bright Room Called Day*. Even Kushner recognized the potential for failure in creating an explicitly political drama. Kushner discerns, “Theater that isn’t entertaining isn’t worth doing. Theater that’s explicitly political has to be *very* entertaining and *very* well done or it will be *very* easily dismissed.”72 Yet Kushner does not see the difficulty inherent in writing a political play as being a good enough justification for not writing political works. On the contrary, Kushner believes it is a vital component of his job as an artist to say something

meaningful—to be committed to a political ideal in his art. He explains, “There is a line past which activism is demanded rather than acting. But if acting is what you do well, then you should do it, and try to make it as valuable, which is to say as socially and politically informed, as possible.”73 Kushner believes that an individual’s commitment to a certain political agenda and its ideals should be a component of the work that he/she creates. In addition, Kushner suggests that if one possesses an artistic talent, one should use this ability in service of a political cause.

This concept of commitment is vital to a definition of political theatre, at least in Eric Bentley’s understanding of the term. In his book Thinking about the Playwright, Bentley suggests: “[A]ll serious authors are [committed]; but that is not what is meant when we speak today of Commitment with a capital C. We mean a political Commitment. And we do not mean that an artist has political views; we mean that his political views enter into his art.”74 Bentley is describing something akin to what Kushner suggests; one’s art should reflect one’s political ideology. For both Kushner and Bentley, there should be no distinction between one’s artistic identity and one’s political identity for one to be considered a political writer. Kushner states, “When the time comes to march, I hope I’ll fall in step, even if I’m in tech with first preview only two days away.”75 Kushner still believes that he can put his political agenda before his art.

Perhaps it is this level of political engagement that lends poignancy to the politics of A Bright Room Called Day. Kushner is suggesting one way of looking at the world—a vision that he believes to be true. In doing so, he gives the audience something real to

73 Kushner, “Notes about Political Theater,” 30.
75 Kushner, “Notes about Political Theatre,” 30.
consider. Questioning, and even disagreeing with, the politics of a work of art is a real and meaningful way in which to engage with the issues that matter in a specific era. If an individual sees *A Bright Room Called Day* and believes its point of view to be false, he/she must contemplate the issues being raised in order to come to such a conclusion. Theatre may not be able to overthrow a government or overturn flawed legislation, but it can engage its audiences in political thought processes: a clear goal of a Theatre of the Fabulous which intends to affect its audiences so that they might make real world change. In doing so, it can, even if only in a very indirect way, lead to some eventual political transformation.

Certainly, this contention could be applied to the Ridiculous; as we have seen, these artists took an aesthetic approach that was in opposition to the status quo, where the radical aspect of the performances was built in to the unique dramaturgy and performance techniques. Yet, what is potentially political in the Ridiculous is not the same as the direct, even didactic, politics of *A Bright Room Called Day*. Indeed, although Kushner is a great theatrical innovator, his political statements, at least in this play, are precisely that: statements. That is very different from a work like those of Smith or Eichelberger, whose greatest statements come out in how they are presented as opposed to what content they present.

**Contemporary Cross-Gendered Performance & the Ridiculous**

Even in the case of artists like Busch and Kushner, whose work arguably resembles Ridiculous Theatre but who also credit Ridiculous Theatre’s creators as important influences, there seems to be a disconnect in the development of the style. The work of these artists is, whether for better or for worse, a departure from the Ridiculous
aesthetic. This difference is only further accentuated when one considers companies or artists whose work seems to be in the Ridiculous style, even if the associated theatre makers do not directly espouse Ridiculous Theatre as an influence. Both the performance pieces of Kiki and Herb and the off-Broadway musical (and later independent film and then Broadway production) *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* appear to have elements of the Ridiculous in their aesthetic. And yet, in both cases, the final product is something that is also much removed from true Ridiculous Theatre.

**Possible Ridiculous Inheritors: Kiki and Herb**

Kiki and Herb began in the same “post-Ridiculous” landscape of other artists mentioned in this chapter. Justin Vivian Bond and Kenny Mellman, respectively, joined forces in 1992 and began their avant-garde drag cabaret act soon after. According to James Wilson, Kiki and Herb were more distinctly political in their performances than most of the Ridiculous and Ridiculous-esque artists heretofore mentioned. Wilson suggests, “This political aspect is a primary characteristic of Kiki and Herb and derives from Bond and Mellman’s background in AIDS activism and political street theatre. Kiki and Herb are washed-up, ridiculously irrelevant lounge singers and perpetually on the comeback trail, but they were created within the turmoil caused by AIDS and the in-your-face theatrics of Queer Nation and ACT-UP.”

Indeed, they are certainly ridiculous, but they also have specific political opinions and ideas they wish to convey.

Once again, we find AIDS playing an active role in the development of this aesthetic. In this case, as with Kushner, it pushes these Ridiculous behaviors from being radical only in their aesthetic choices to being radical in their actual statements as well.

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Ridiculous remix is used as a means to very specific and direct political ends. One track from “Kiki and Herb Will Die For You,” their live Carnegie Hall show, mashes up everything from Wu-Tang Clan to Eminem with their usual cabaret look and aesthetic. “The Revolution Medley” has strong political overtones, ending on the suggestion that “The revolution will be live.”

Despite the political nature of some of their antics, Kiki and Herb were able to translate their shtick to larger audiences than the limited Downtown club scene would allow, performing a concert at Carnegie Hall, recorded for album release; appearing in a film featuring such stars as Sigourney Weaver; and even creating a full-scale two-act Broadway production. This work, titled Kiki and Herb Alive on Broadway (2006), featured Bond’s gender mashup construction of the character of Kiki who occupied audiences with her usual rants about love and motherhood, her incessant drinking, the history of Herb as a “gay-Jew-‘tard,” as well as more biting political commentary—about then president George W. Bush—and references to her own presence at the birth of Christ. This remix of elements was all punctuated with the duo’s song stylings, covering great hits in their unique style, as they had done at Carnegie Hall.

For critics, this production transcended its downtown roots. In Ben Brantley’s extremely positive New York Times review of the 2006 production, he both singles out Kiki and Herb’s downtown past while celebrating their transcendence of it: “And a performance that should, by rights, be just a night of imitative song and shtick from another pair of happy high-campers from the alternative club scene becomes irresistibly

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77 Kiki and Herb, vocal performance of “The Revolution Medley,” by Kiki and Herb, released February 8, 2005, on Kiki and Herb Will Die for You: Live at Carnegie Hall, Evolver, 2 Discs, CD.
full-bodied art.” Apparenty, just role-playing in drag on stage would not have had the same impact of this piece, in Brantley’s estimation. Kiki and Herb are worthy of his praise because they created something that went beyond their “club scene” roots. Ultimately, they were able to use the scene that they came from to create a piece that would be appealing to broader audiences than just those that partake of “downtown” theatre.

For Brantley, what is best about this production is not what it shares with the Ridiculous, but the degree to which it moves beyond the boundaries of the tradition that it inherits. The potentially radical constructions of Ridiculous remix and gender mashup are here seen as something that has already been done. That style—over-the-top drag performances marked with pop culture references—has lost its edge in Brantley’s estimation. He writes:

Fakery is often more real than reality in the glamorous and tawdry world of theater. I should probably state, for the uninitiated, that the ultrawomanly Kiki is channeled by a man named Justin Bond. Herb is the alter ego of a truly inspired pop musicologist named Kenny Mellman. This sounds like regulation tacky countercultural standup, laced with the overemotional kitsch that drag queens borrow from old movies, right? Here, Brantley does not take into consideration that Bond does not identify as a man; Brantley may be misreading the production on which he is commenting. The drag

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79 Brantley, “Kiki and Herb.”
tradition which Brantley references is the same one that Eichelberger mocked in his productions, but it also includes the practices with which he and other Ridiculous artists were associated. As I have mentioned, both cross-dressing and a preoccupation with performance as a career are essential elements in Ridiculous Theatre. Yet, Kiki and Herb’s act does seem to be something more than just a Ridiculous mockery of surrounding popular culture. Their *Alive on Broadway* show confronted real hard-hitting topics, like religion and politics, not just for humor, but also in order to use humor to expose larger, very unfunny, realities. Indeed, as Brantley notes, “They use the surface of camp as a tool for detonating surfaces.”

Like Kushner, Kiki and Herb built on their Ridiculous predecessors for very political ends. In this way, although they share many aesthetic elements with Theatre of the Ridiculous, they are some new version of the form, one more applicable to the twenty-first century and mainstream audiences, while being more politically abrasive.

**Possible Ridiculous Inheritors: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch***

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is another show that developed out of a similar drag and club aesthetic as the one that gave life to Kiki and Herb. “Don’t you know me? I’m the new Berlin Wall!” Hedwig, the protagonist of John Cameron Mitchell’s musical, exclaims. (S)he is iconic of the divide between genders, the political divides between people, and the strange line between high and low culture, while being, once again, a politically charged Ridiculous descendent. In his “Author’s Note” to the published edition, Mitchell notes the importance of site to his work. He writes, “We deliberately developed it [*Hedwig*] over a number of years in non-theatrical venues—rock clubs, drag

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80 Brantley, “Kiki and Herb.”
bars, birthday parties, friends’ patios—in order to keep it free-flowing, improvisational, alive.”  

This show, like the works of Eichelberger, is a work that is deeply indebted to the downtown club scene and the kind of free-form culture-blending theatre associated with it.

The show, about Hedwig, a victim of a botched male-to-female sex change operation, and her failed love affair with now mega-star Tommy Gnosis, includes much of what I have already demonstrated to be key elements of the Ridiculous stage. The lead role can be played by a performer of either gender because, no matter who dons Hedwig’s wigs, he or she will be forced to cross genders. Hedwig is both male and female, while being neither sex biologically: inherently a gender mashup. In its earliest versions, Mitchell played the lead role, in a similarly flamboyant mode of dress as that once worn by Smith or Eichelberger. The songs are pure Ridiculous remix, born of a love affair with both the most pop culture of references—such as Farrah Fawcett—and a high cultural knowledge—like “The Origin of Love,” a song about Aristophanes’s contribution to Plato’s Symposium.

This show, like the performances of Kiki and Herb, is built upon a Ridiculous foundation. Yet, like the performances created by Bond and Mellman, for better or for worse, Hedwig goes beyond its Ridiculous inheritance. In his New York Times review of the original Off-Broadway production, what Peter Marks celebrates is the way in which Mitchell’s show transcends its drag show roots, as had been lauded in Kiki and Herb’s performance as well. Marks writes:

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82 Mitchell, Hedwig and the Angry Inch, 9.
The most impressive achievement, however, is by Mr. Mitchell, who transforms what might have been just another campy drag act into something deeper and more adventurous. His Hedwig, all glittered up in her denim outfit with the pink leather fringe, is in hiding up there in front of us. Embittered by a sexually confusing German childhood and a lifelong series of disappointments, especially the mutilating surgery that leaves him/her with an “angry inch,” Hedwig spends her time onstage coming to terms with the implications of mistakes she made, of her self-denying masquerade.83

This show allows its character to explore the complications inherent in crossing the gender divide and what it means to do so incompletely. In so doing, it hearkens back to the real theoretical concerns to which drag draws attention: what aspects of the self could really be seen as being essential or innate and to what degree are all elements of selfhood performed or performative. The larger concerns seem to be what is of value in experiencing such a performance on stage. Yet, Marks ends his review by suggesting that “to solve a problem like Hedwig? You sit back and enjoy her show. In the end, that’s really all she asks.”84 Like its Ridiculous ancestors, then, one element of this show that really matters is the extent to which it is able to entertain.

Because of its appeal to both countercultural and mainstream audiences, the musical was quite marketable, both with other performers, such as Ally Sheedy, in the lead role, as well as in the form of a full-length feature film. In his New York Times

84 Ibid.

Holden is able to celebrate the entertaining performances, costumes, and songs in the film, while staying somewhat elusive about the overall production’s meaning or importance.

Holden seems uncertain about a story with these themes, presented with this aesthetic style, being marketed for a conventional audience. For Holden, what this film suggests is that this sort of self-performance has now arrived in a mainstream way, whether he likes or not. Holden contends:

In such a climate the Hedwigs of this world are beginning to seem less like freaks and more like brave individualists mapping out an emerging frontier where boys can be girls and girls can be boys, and everyone has the freedom to couple however he or she chooses. If the glam-rock era is long gone, “Hedwig” reminds us, its subversive spirit, which has percolated under the surface of rock culture for more than two decades, lives on.

According to Holden, what was once most subversive about this sort of performative gender play on stage is now a normal form, one that includes all of us, insofar as we accept that we are always performing our selves. If this type of drag performance is no longer something unique to a particular setting and aesthetic, what then does that mean?

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86 Ibid.
for Ridiculous Theatre? Is there a place for it in the contemporary mainstream, commercial theatre? Like Kiki and Herb before, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, originally a downtown club act, has found a way to be adapted to Broadway.

The spring 2014 Broadway production, with television superstar Neil Patrick Harris in the titular role, proved that the Ridiculous aesthetic is not only still applicable, but also still quite meaningful for contemporary audiences. In anticipation of playing the role, Harris, according to a *New York Times* feature, “[feels] anxious, but [his] fearless quotient is higher than it’s ever been” to perform the demanding musical score. This *Hedwig* exemplifies what a twenty-first-century incarnation of the Ridiculous might look like. From the moment one enters the Belasco Theatre, it is clear that we have entered an at least semi-Ridiculous space. The stage setting, supposedly constructed of abandoned set pieces from the previous night’s opening of the theatrical flop *The Hurt Locker—The Musical*, hearkens back to Jack Smith’s junk-filled loft. Center stage is marked with a “junker” sort of car, which seems to have reversed into the backdrop, as its back half is scattered in the air behind. This deconstructed piece of junk, which causes the stage to be filled with even more clutter, suggests a potential similar reverence for the valueless that Smith once possessed. This show, like Smith’s late-night loft performances, will attempt to turn trash into treasure through the ritualistic alchemy of theatre.

In addition, this production does not allow for a distinct separation between actors and audience. Hedwig knows we are present and enters the audience space, even to the point of discomfort, gyrating over and spitting on members of the first row. To make the play relevant to a contemporary audience, and to maintain Mitchell’s idea of the piece as

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a living breathing adapting thing, the popular culture references have been updated, both to take in the play’s current setting (referring to the history of and myths about ghosts of the Belasco) and the current cultural scene (with jokes about current celebrities and events). Gender is layered not only in the figure of Hedwig but also in his husband, Yitzhak, a woman playing a man who wishes to wear wigs and perform in drag. The two main characters are figures who defy gender, with Hedwig’s over-the-top makeup and costume elements, and her botched biology, and Yitzhak’s beautiful feminine voice shining through the male attire. What could have been a silly drag stand-up act or an entertaining but pointless star vehicle maintains its status as a relevant commentary on the struggles of finding oneself in the contemporary world. Neither the aesthetic elements nor the discussion of the Berlin Wall seem out of place here. Rather, Hedwig on Broadway is a powerful production about identity and love. It is marked by many of the elements that could be considered Ridiculous, proving that the Ridiculous has a place on Broadway and that it can use that important cultural location to make meaningful statements about serious topics.

When Cross-Dressing Becomes Commercial

Certainly, much of contemporary Broadway and off-Broadway theatre would suggest that there is now room in commercial theatre for the aesthetic elements that were honed in the Ridiculous Theatre. For example, the quotation, “Ladies, gentlemen, and all those who have yet to decide” comes directly out of the Broadway musical Kinky Boots, a show that suggests exactly how far this sort of “Ridiculous” performance has come in the past few decades. This show has been considered so conventional that it not only

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88 Kinky Boots performance at the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, November 28, 2013, NBC.
won the Tony Award, but was also a marquee performance at the “family-friendly” Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade in 2013. Ben Brantley feels like the motif—of having a big brassy drag queen make the protagonist and the audience fall in love with “her” via performance and charm—is already a bit played out. Of Kinky Boots, Brantley writes in the New York Times, “It’s a shameless emotional button pusher, presided over—be warned—by that most weary of latter-day Broadway archetypes, a strong and sassy drag queen who dispenses life lessons like an automated fortune cookie.”

On the one hand, Kinky Boots inclusion in the Thanksgiving festivities suggests that as a culture, Americans are at a point where a play about drag queens is considered general entertainment, where a Ridiculous sort of gender mashup blended with a Ridiculous remix kind of adaptation musical is no longer something radical.

And yet, this presentation created a minor uproar among social media-using conservative Americans. The Huffington Post reports that “Although the show’s message is of acceptance and tolerance and the performance was relatively tame… right wingers across America took to social networks to voice their outrage at NBC for broadcasting it,” citing tweets that remark on how “disgusting” or inappropriate inclusion of the sequence was. There may be a place for such gender-bending performance in

90 “‘Kinky Boots’ Performance At Macy’s Day Parade Provokes Outrage,” The Huffington Post, Posted November 29, 2013; Updated December 1, 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/29/kinky-boots-macys_n_4360035.html The aforementioned tweets came from @ChanRussell22 and @stevemcgrew among others. The article reproduces the tweets via screenshots.
mainstream New York culture, but American culture at large still seems somewhat resistant to such presentations.

Of course, cross-dressing has been a part of the Broadway stage practically since its inception. Yet the drag performing in a musical such as *Kinky Boots* is not the sort of cross-dressing that we would associate with Broadway in its golden age. It is not being done simply as a joke, as in, say the film *Some Like It Hot*; rather, these “crossed” identities are meant to be the individual’s actual self. He/she lives as the opposite gender, as opposed to merely dressing up this way to achieve a particular goal, as in a show such as *Victor/Victoria*. The cross-dressed individual in these more contemporary Broadway musicals creates an identity that defies a binary gender system. In the case of a show like *Rent*, for example, the character Angel identifies more as a female than as a male. In his tribute to Angel upon the occasion of his death from AIDS, Mark must correct himself in his usage of the gendered pronoun “his” for its feminine counterpart.

Taking this dismissal of gendered pronouns even further is Justin Vivian Bond, the famed Kiki of Kiki and Herb. Rather than employing the gendered titles “Ms.” or “Mr.,” when referring to the self, Bond uses the title “Mx Bond.” In Bond’s first blog post of 2011, entitled “New Year, New Name, New Gender,” Bond explains key terms, such as this prefix and the pronoun “v,” meant in place of he/him or she/her when referring to Bond. This all goes with the gender with which v identifies, which is “Trans.”91 In shows like the aforementioned *Kinky Boots*, the gender performance is not about simply becoming the opposite gender identity, but about revealing the performance of self, drawing attention to how the putting on of sexy sequined boots can give one the

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chance to redefine one’s identity outside of a male-female dichotomous system. Bond’s identification system takes this a step further, proving that such a binary cannot possibly encapsulate the myriad variations with which an individual might identify. Some other model might be more useful or even necessary in order to include everyone.

Cross-dressing on its own, then, does not Ridiculous Theatre make. On the contemporary Broadway stage, cross-dressing, when associated with sexual orientation, is less controversial or outlandish than it perhaps has ever been.\textsuperscript{92} \textit{La Cage Aux Folles} reminds its viewers that “life ain’t worth a damn ‘til you can say ‘I am what I am,’”\textsuperscript{93} a proclamation provided in a show which features an ensemble of cross-dressed chorus girls, while \textit{Hairspray} allows a man-impersonating-a-woman to stand in for the lead character’s mother without much questioning of the situation. Ben Brantley writes of Harvey Fierstein in the cross-dressed role, “Big (Mr. Fierstein wears a fat suit), burly and tart-tongued as she sweats over the laundry she takes in, Edna is not just a cross-dressing sight gag. She’s every forgotten housewife, recreated in monumental proportions and waiting for something to tap her hidden magnificence.”\textsuperscript{94} The cross-dressing is at the heart of the artistry, neither a punchline nor a source for mockery.

\textsuperscript{92} Certainly cross-dressing has a long tradition on Broadway stages, and vaudeville ones before that. What these musicals add to that presentation is the evocation of sexual identity or sexuality being linked to the cross-dressed representations. Unlike Mae West’s 1927 play \textit{The Drag}, these musicals have led to little in the way of raids or riots, despite the occasional angry tweets.

\textsuperscript{93} “I Am What I Am,” from \textit{La Cage aux Folles}, book by Harvey Fierstein, lyrics and music by Jerry Herman, originally produced on Broadway in 1983.

In the same vein as the commercialization of the drag queen heroine, the sort of cultural mixing that we find in the Ridiculous is now a staple of jukebox musical construction. Of 2011’s Broadway production of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, Christopher Isherwood writes for the *New York Times*:

> It’s the kind of mix you might find blaring from the jukebox in a Florida gay bar if patrons of varying ages and argumentative tastes were on hand: everything from Dionne Warwick to Donna Summer and the Village People, Madonna, Cyndi Lauper and Pat Benatar. Let’s not forget the contribution from that immortal dance-floor diva John Denver.95

Here, again, we have what seems to be the semblance of a Ridiculous motif: cross-dressing characters who love to cite from their surrounding culture, though the sum total does not seem quite to add up to the cutting commentary on its time that a Vaccaro production might. By moving to Broadway, it would seem, these Ridiculous aesthetic elements have lost their radical edge.

**The Ridiculous Has Moved Uptown: So What?**

“No Charles Ludlam,” according to Everett Quinton, “no RuPaul being taken seriously.”96 Ludlam’s influence is felt on all strata of twenty-first-century culture, whether it is recognized or not. It seems as if Ridiculous remix, the reverence for the popular, and practices of gender mashup are everywhere in contemporary popular culture. If Ridiculous lineage is loosely defined, then even a performer like Lady Gaga,

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96 Everett Quinton, telephone interview with the author, March 3, 2014.
who often dresses in not only gender-defying, but entirely imagination-defying, ensembles, could be said to be in its tradition. In her 2013 Top 40 radio hit, “Applause,” Gaga sings, “I’ve overheard your theory ‘nostalgia’s for geeks’/I guess sir, if you say so, some of us just like to read/One second I’m a Koons, then suddenly the Koons is me/Pop culture was in art, now art’s in pop culture in me.” When I first heard this track, I could not help but think of the Ridiculous: a form that was entirely preoccupied with nostalgia and that found a way to bring pop culture into art. If it is indeed the case that “now art’s in pop culture” in artists like Lady Gaga, it can be said that this culturally blended aesthetic has truly arrived in a mainstream way. Yet what would that mean for and to its earlier practitioners?

It is uncertain what other Ridiculous artists would have made of finding elements of their downtown aesthetic on MTV, social media, and the Great White Way. Charles Ludlam, for one, would likely not have been that upset about this, so long as he was profiting from it himself; he pursued a commercial career to some degree. At the time of his death, he was actively trying to break in to mainstream cinema, television, and theatre. Ronald Tavel was a bit more academic in his imaginings of the Ridiculous, but what would this extreme commercialization and commodification have meant for the development of that style? If Tavel did indeed design Ridiculous Theatre as a reaction to Theatre of the Absurd, then Ridiculous-ism would be rendered irrelevant anyhow, as the

97 I am not proposing that Lady Gaga is Ridiculous; I am merely commenting on how certain aspects of her performance aesthetic overlap with qualities found in Ridiculous Theatre.
Absurd, too, is largely a dated movement, a product of a post-war World War II world that has been reshaped time and again since: in light of Vietnam, 9/11, and the various conflicts in the Middle East.

One Ridiculous player who would clearly have not supported the move to Broadway was Jack Smith: even during his career, he was angry at the ways in which Ludlam used the same camp style as him in order to create traditional farces. Broadway shows using some of his aesthetic elements for no reason other than commercial goals would have likely come across to him as the worst sort of “landlordism.” A show such as Larson’s Rent bemoaning the payment of the titular funds, as Smith once did, in order to bring in millions in t-shirt and album sales, national tour performances, and film licensing, would likely have infuriated Smith.

Where, then, does that leave the Ridiculous? Is it applicable to the NEW New York of the twenty-first century, with its high rents, especially below Fourteenth Street, as well as its abundance of theatrical performances of all sorts? Or, is the Ridiculous more important as a product of its time? On the one hand, what the preceding examples suggest is that the moment for the Ridiculous has arrived; it has the possibility to be more popular and to reach more audiences than it ever did before. On the other hand, however, its most essential quality—its radical questioning of the status quo through its preoccupation with popular culture and the representation of unstable gendered identities—has been lost in its commercialization. In many cases, it has become nothing more than another humorous cliché, used not to alter perceptions but to sell tickets and fill seats.
Although sometimes hard to see, the ghosts of the Ridiculous are, in fact, everywhere, downtown and uptown alike. As I constructed this conclusion, I seemed to find more and more productions by Ridiculous inheritors (the Broadway *Hedwig*, Busch’s new play *The Tribute Artist*, and numerous downtown productions, such as *A Man’s A Man* at Classic Stage Company starring Justin Vivian Bond) or including artists either once associated with or influenced by the Ridiculous creators, that might have a place in a conclusion such as this. Because the Ridiculous seems to leave traces everywhere, it can as easily be said to be nowhere. As it has spread, it has dissipated, becoming both omnipresent and easier-to-swallow. It is as if the ghosts of the Ridiculous are all over, no longer confined to their downtown Ridiculous geography, determined to make their presence felt in even some of the strangest of places. They are now both the highbrow and the lowbrow references, the ghosts to be worshipped, and the divas to be incarnated on stage. Their moment—the true Ridiculous time and place—may have ended, but their legacy lives on.

And, in this way, not only this dissertation, but all of New York theatre is haunted by the Theatre of the Ridiculous. For our entertainment as theatregoers, for aesthetic interpretation, and, perhaps most importantly, for the presence of queerness of theatre, this is a very good thing. How we can interpret performance has forever been changed by the Ridiculous landscape; this movement showed the value of blending cultural references and gender iconography, practices very common in contemporary multimedia practices, in order to create something not only innovative but also potentially radical. It means that we can still make theatre within a Ridiculous geography and still find that it has something meaningful to say—even if that meaningful quality is born of nothing
more than a silly joke based on a reference to a ghost (even of a B-movie star) of a long-forgotten cultural past.
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