

**TWO LIONS PRODUCTIONS  
PRESENTS**

THE  
*Lady* IN  
QUESTION IS  
**CHARLES BUSCH**

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY  
**JOHN CATANIA AND CHARLES IGNACIO**  
2005, 94 minutes, USA

“Busch is a New York institution,  
and *The Lady in Question* is a worthy and entertaining tribute.” —*Variety*

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## **FEATURING**

Charles Busch

Rosie O'Donnell

Boy George

B.D. Wong

Kathleen Turner

Julie Halston

Bina Sharif

Billy Wheelan

Mark Rucker

Michael Musto

Paul Rudnick

Andy Halliday

Arnie Kolodner

Kenneth Elliott

Theresa Aceves

## CREW

Produced & Directed by	John Catania Charles Ignacio
Executive Producer	Daryl Roth
Edited by	John Catania
Co-Editors	Jon Baskin Charles Ignacio
Creative & Technical Consultant	Alton Christensen
Editorial Consultant	Brian Kates
Camera	Dane Lawing Tim Newman Peter Scheer
Sound Design	John Wiggins
Logo and Graphic Design	B.T. Whitehill
Associate Producer	Richard Davis
Additional Camera	Steve Harris Niels Melo Desireena Almoradie Charles Ignacio
Color Correction	Jillian Buckley
Make-up	Louis E. Braun
Production Services	PrimaLux Studios

## SYNOPSIS

In Catania and Ignacio's first feature documentary we look deep inside the world of one of the most prolific, talented, and outrageous New York theater artists of the last two decades, beloved playwright, actor, novelist, drag artist, and *leading lady*, Charles Busch. Splashed on the map in 1984 at the dingy yet inspired Limbo Lounge as one of the burgeoning artists of New York's East Village arts scene, Busch's scandalously sex-charged, cross-dressing classic, **Vampire Lesbians of Sodom** quickly became a theater phenomenon. It moved from the Limbo Lounge to the Provincetown Playhouse and ran an unprecedented five years, securing its place as one of the longest-running shows in Off-Broadway history. **Vampire Lesbians of Sodom** also marked the birth of one of New York's most memorable theatrical companies, as Busch's legendary Theater-in-Limbo plays brought together an eclectic troupe of actors whose talents are on display in rare archival video footage.

The documentary begins in 2000 at the opening night of Busch's hit Broadway comedy, **The Tale of The Allergist's Wife**. "I never knew the big bucks that could be made by exploiting your family," explains Busch. Lifted from years of eavesdropping on his own family drama, **The Tale of The Allergist's Wife** offers a window into Busch's traumatic, yet wildly creative childhood. Having lost his mother at age seven, he reacts to this tragic event, as well the absence of his father, by immersing himself in a world of classic movies. Ignoring the demands of school, Busch watches movies day and night, preferring the black and white world of 1930's and 40's Hollywood to his own painful reality.

But expert knowledge of Hollywood is not enough to keep Busch from nearly flunking out of school. Swooping to the rescue is a real-life Auntie Mame figure in the form of his mother's oldest sister, Lillian Blum. Aunt Lillian saves the young Charles from the stifling suburbs and brings him to Manhattan where his creative appetites are finally sated. Busch discovers his talents and makes it through high school and then Northwestern University, but upon graduating is hit with a new harsh reality: his dream of being up on the stage is thwarted at every turn by theater directors who find him "too odd, too gay." Busch says of this time, "If nobody else was going to put me in a play I decided I would have to get it done myself. So I became a writer so I would have the opportunity to act." So begins Busch's journey to become one of the most recognizable figures in New York theatre today.

After graduating from Northwestern Busch spends six years touring the country in one-man shows, performing everywhere from bars to college activity centers. Childhood friend Andy Halliday explains, "He'd go anywhere. He would open in a garage. He had to perform, it was like a drug." Then one fateful summer night in 1984, while attending a bizarre, experimental performance at New York's gritty Limbo Lounge, Busch is inspired to write the wildly popular **Vampire Lesbians Of Sodom**.

The overwhelming response in the East Village to the racy skit compels Busch to write more plays for his newly formed troupe of off-beat actors, and within a few years the new Theatre-in-Limbo company has a string of plays to their name. **Psycho Beach Party**, **Times Square Angel**, **The Lady In Question**, and **Red Scare On Sunset**, all play Off-Broadway and establish Busch as one of the few theater artists who maintains his own company, writing plays and starring as leading lady in every work. Busch's highly nuanced artistry soon becomes the gold standard for drag performance in New York.

Eventually, after seven non-stop years (1984 to 1991), the legendary Theatre-in-Limbo is torn apart by fatigue and AIDS, as several core members are lost to the epidemic. Then, after a long decade of reflection and experimentation, and just as the millennium turns, Busch experiences a new wave of success when he writes his hit Broadway comedy, **The Tale Of The Allergist's Wife**. The future seems only rosy for Charles Busch, when in the wake of his triumph his life is almost cut short. Just hours before emergency surgery a doctor explains to him, “Mr. Busch what you have kills 50% of the people in the first half-hour, and the rest by the weekend...” (*Busch himself responds to this horrible episode through a silent black and white short created especially for the documentary*).

Against enormous odds Charles Busch survives and rallies: in quick succession he writes the new Broadway book to **Taboo**, a Rosie O'Donnell/Boy George musical; returns triumphantly to the Off-Broadway stage in a new play, **Shanghai Moon**; and stars in **Die, Mommie, Die!**, his first feature film as *leading-lady*. As a packed theater of adoring fans welcomes Busch to the Castro Theater stage in San Francisco for the **Die, Mommie, Die!** premiere, Busch finally reveals the true inspiration and motivation behind his unparalleled drag artistry...

## **DIRECTORS' STATEMENT**

We were drawn to document the work of Charles Busch because of his highly unique accomplishments—a successful actor who writes his own scripts and screenplays that he performs in drag as leading lady. That Busch eventually found greater exposure on Broadway, film, and television proves that a wider audience has finally caught up with downtown theater devotees in appreciating Busch's unique talents and his great love of American theater and Hollywood tradition.

In his dead-on comic parodies of classic Hollywood films, Busch exposes the underside of American society, a culture of celebrity, falseness and deception, coupled with the gender constructs defining masculinity and femininity. The female protagonists he writes for himself—strong leading ladies written in the style of Jean Harlow, Norma Shearer, or Barbara Stanwyck—exhibit false identities, and these roles showcase Busch's virtuosity in drag performance.

As long-time producers of **In the Life**, the Emmy-nominated PBS public affairs series on gay life, we called on Charles Busch numerous times to appear on the program. A 1993 **In the Life** episode in which Busch portrayed a-half dozen, offbeat characters—Tracey Ullman-style—is now held in the Museum of Television and Radio in Los Angeles and New York. Of the many dozens of artists we've profiled, we found Busch's life the most compelling, a moving universal story of transformation and personal realization through art. No one captured our imaginations like Charles Busch.

Through working with Charles Busch across a decade's time, we gained his trust to tell his one-of-a-kind story. He has given us complete access to a rich video archive of New York downtown theater, and his openness in letting us cull through hundreds of hours of footage of his classic 1980's Theatre-in-Limbo plays enabled us to act almost as theater historians. Now his wacky and irreverent performances, enjoyed by thousands of adventurous theatergoers over the past 20 years, will be seen by a completely new army of enthusiasts.

Charles Busch has given us extraordinary access to his life and we hope to achieve a level of documentary storytelling that is told with the flamboyance, flair and insight it rightly deserves.

**John Catania and Charles Ignacio**

Co-Directors

## THE SCENE

### **1980s East Village New York**

Excerpts from *Downtown* by Michael Musto, Vintage Books, 1986

"The downtown scene is so transient that just as you discover a club, you find it's been turned in a pizzeria, but that's okay; wait fifteen minutes and it'll be a club again. There's such a need for constant stimulation that hair salons have art on the walls and the art galleries can have hair on the walls if they like it. Clubs become showrooms, American Legion offices become clubs, and the only thing certain is that nothing is certain. Roller discos suddenly change into gay Arab-biker sushi bars just for the sake of change, and no one questions the transformation as long as free drink tickets are still available." p. 2

"The fascination may go both north and south, but the thrill of downtown is still the newest and most exciting of recent New York phenomena. A lot more people want to get in than get out. "Right now the entire world is focused on downtown," says Vito Bruno. "It's a major force. You put those key downtown names on an invitation and everybody wants to come down and check it out." p. 9

"The nicest of the downtown antiheroes, and the least likely to throw up on stage (it's not aesthetically appealing; besides, he'd want to turn it into a production number) is Charles Busch, a drag performer whose shows at the Limbo Lounge brought him the kind of adoring audience that only stopped laughing so they could hear the next line. There was cause for their devotion; Busch's extreme likeability, even—or especially—when he's being vicious, his economy of words and movement, and his total extravagance of wigs and costumes made him both the king and queen of undiscovered New York theater. Busch, like [Ethyl] Eichelberger, plays the great diva roles—in his case, *Theodora—She-Bitch of Byzantium*, 1940s nightclub chanteuse Irish O'Flanagan (in *Times Square Angel*), stage actress Madeleine Astarté (in *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*) and Gidget. Like John Kelly, his act only begins the second he's in drag. "The dress gives me a lot more confidence," he says, "I couldn't even raise my hand in class, but when I have the dress and makeup on, I'm not myself. I'm this actress." p.137

"As a result of their Limbo triumphs, the troupe moved to a very respectable off-Broadway theater, the Provincetown Playhouse, where they received rave reviews and played for a whole new audience who didn't have to crawl through rubble to discover Busch's glittering talents. The amazing media approval of Busch, even from the straightest of old fogies, made him into an acceptable adventure for everyone, many of whom found themselves snickering into their three-piece-suit collars for the first twenty minutes before letting go with shameless out-and-out hysteria that said they were happy to be part of Busch's breakthrough. The word spread, and soon the diva was negotiating a movie deal (West Coast Productions of the *Vampire Lesbians/Sleeping Beauty* double bill), and no doubt bigger dressing rooms. Busch might even get to Broadway some day (maybe Tuesday). But somehow no matter what happens, his Limbo Lounge days will go down in theater legend as his truly glamorous ones." p. 138

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS**

**John Catania and Charles Ignacio, Co-Directors/Producers** – As Two Lions Productions founders, John Catania and Charles Ignacio are award-winning media producers with over a two decades of television production experience. Their work includes producing the Emmy-nominated PBS public affairs series, *In the Life*, as well as producing stories for *That Money Show*, and the Emmy-winning educational series, *TV 411*. Their documentaries include *The Boys of Manchester*, a behind-the-scenes look at the original British drama *Queer as Folk* (the inspiration for the successful Showtime series), and *Life in a Box*, also currently on the film festival circuit.

For *In the Life*, **John Catania** has produced and edited stories ranging from America's only television look at the growing gay movements in Hong Kong and China, to the music and life of jazz composer Billy Strayhorn, to interviews with Stockard Channing, Petula Clark, George Stephanopoulos, Sir Ian McKellen, Bruce Vilanch, and the openly gay mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit. His regular coverage of theater for *In the Life* includes reports on *Rent*, *The Rocky Horror Show*, *On the Town*, and a profile of Disney Theatrical Productions producer, Thomas Schumacher. For Canadian television, Catania produced and edited the 39-part series, *In the Life Encore! Edition*. He is the recipient of the 1995 Seigenthaler Award for Excellence in Journalism and was named one of "101 Movers & Shakers" in Entertainment Weekly's "Gay Hollywood 2000" issue.

Since 2000, **Charles Ignacio** has received three Emmy nominations as the former executive producer of *In the Life*, presented by Thirteen/WNET. Besides overseeing production of the series in its first 10 years, Mr. Ignacio produced the following documentary specials for television: 1993 *March on Washington* and *Stonewall 25: Global Voices of Pride and Protest*, the latter in association with Channel 4/U.K. Prior to his tenure at *In the Life*, he worked on staff at HBO and Thirteen/WNET. Ignacio has written for The Advocate; been interviewed for the Los Angeles Times, The Hollywood Reporter, and USA Today; and named one of Out magazine's "Out 100." He is currently the Deputy Director for the national marriage equality organization Freedom to Marry.

**Daryl Roth, Executive Producer** – As President of Daryl Roth Productions, Daryl Roth is privileged to have produced four Pulitzer Prize-winning plays: *Proof*, *Wit*, *How I Learned to Drive*, and *Three Tall Women*, and she's also garnered Tony Awards for *Proof* and Edward Albee's *The Goat*. Among Roth's other highly acclaimed productions are *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* by Charles Busch, *The Play About the Baby*, *De La Guarda*, and most recently, *Harlem Song*, *Our Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> Street*, *Tea at Five*, *Talking Heads*, *Medea*, and *Salome the Reading*. Film credits include the HBO feature *Dinner with Friends*, based on Donald Margulies' Pulitzer Prize-winning play, directed by Norman Jewison. Future productions include a feature film based on the John Searles' novel, *Boy Still Missing*. Roth serves on the Board of Directors of Lincoln Center Theatre, the Sundance Institute, the LABYrinth Theater Company, and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. Roth was profiled in *The New Yorker* and included in *Crain's "100 Most Influential Women in Business."* *The Daryl Roth Creative Spirit Award* is given annually to a theater artist who has demonstrated exceptional talent and promise in his or her field.

**Alton Christensen, Creative & Technical Consultant** – A broadcast veteran of 25 years, Alton Christensen got his start as a news editor and feature producer at KPRC-TV (an NBC affiliate) in Houston, TX, where he acquired skills in graphics design and animation. Those skills landed him the position of art director at The Editing Company, a post-production facility in Houston. In 1988, Christensen signed on as senior animator for a newly syndicated Washington, DC based television show called USA Today on TV. After its run, Christensen freelanced as an animator in Europe. In 1992, while working as a senior animator for NBC Sports, Alton worked with the graphics team for the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona. He won two Sports Emmy Awards for his participation in that project. In 1993, Christensen founded Edgeworx, a pace-setting post-production and graphic design environment. The company provides work for broadcast, cable networks, and ad agencies. TrillianMedia.net, part of Trillian, Inc., began as a venture to develop content for use in various media.

**Jon Baskin, Co-Editor** – Baskin has been directing, producing and editing his own films for years. His recent documentary short entitled "I Am Not A Juvenile Delinquent" traces the steps of a group of incarcerated teenage girls through rehabilitation. His documentaries include the critically acclaimed *BEEF*, *Weathered and Torn*, and *14th Street Between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>*. Baskin has been an editor for the past 15 years at places like USA Network, ESPN and *Saturday Night Live*. He earned an Emmy Nomination and Monitor Award for his work at HBO, where he is currently on staff. He earned his Bachelor's Degree from The Newhouse School at Syracuse University. He created his production company Hitchin Pictures in 1995 after purchasing a CP-16 camera to begin shooting *BEEF*.

**Brian A. Kates, Editorial Consultant** – Brian Kates most recently finished editing George C. Wolfe's film directorial debut *Lackawanna Blues* for HBO. Kates also edited the film *The Woodsman*, written and directed by Nicole Kassell, starring Kevin Bacon, Kyra Sedgwick, Mos Def and Eve, and premiered at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival. Kates was Co-Editor of the independent film hit, *Tarnation* which premiered at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival. He has edited numerous feature films and videos including HBO's *The Laramie Project, Jails, Hospital, and Hip-Hop* (Danny Hoch; Mark Benjamin), *Trick* (Jim Fall), and the award-winning short film *Tree Shade* (Lisa Collins), which won the Student Academy Award. Kates studied film production and Judaic Studies at New York University.

**Laverne Berry, Legal Representation** – Laverne Berry brings more than 15 years of award-winning television production and distribution experience. She has served as Director, Business & Legal Affairs for A&E Television networks, NY, where she oversaw the business, legal development and production of *Nero Wolfe* and the Emmy-nominated mini-series *Shackleton*. She has been the Director, Program Distribution, Marketing & Sales for Thirteen/WNET; Executive Producer, American Filmworks; Producer and Director of Public Affairs for RKO General. As an independent, she produced award-winning films for PBS and AidsFilm, NY. In her law practice, she has represented media clients and packaged performers with television, CD, video and touring deals.

## ABOUT THE SUBJECT

**Charles Busch** – Busch is the author and star of such plays as *Psycho Beach Party*, *Times Square Angel*, *The Lady in Question*, *Red Scare on Sunset*, *You Should Be So Lucky*, *Queen Amarantha* and *Shanghai Moon*. His play *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom* ran five years in New York and is one of the longest-running plays in Off-Broadway history.

In 1988, he wrote a new libretto for the 1955 musical *Ankles Aweigh* for Goodspeed Opera and has also adapted the book of the Truman Capote/Harold Arlen musical *House of Flowers* for a tour with Patti Labelle. On film, he has appeared in *Addams Family Values*, *It Could Happen To You* and *Trouble on The Corner*. He wrote the screenplay and starred in the film version of his play *Psycho Beach Party*, which co-starred Thomas Gibson (*Dharma and Greg*) and Lauren Ambrose (*Six Feet Under*).

In 1995, he co-authored and appeared in a critically acclaimed run in the Off-Broadway musical *Swingtime Canteen*. 1997 saw him performing his one-man show *Flipping My Wig* at the WPA Theatre in New York. During this time, Busch starred as the fabulous Mame Dennis in a memorable staged reading of *Auntie Mame* at the American Place Theatre along with Marcia Lewis, Kelly Bishop, Maxwell Caulfield, Juliet Mills, Barbara Feldon, John Davidson and the late Peggy Cass recreating her original role of Agnes Gooch.

In 2000, Manhattan Theatre Club produced his play *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* starring Linda Lavin, Tony Roberts and Michele Lee. It was nominated for a Drama Desk Award for best play and won Mr. Busch the Outer Critic's Circle John Gassner Award for Playwriting. It reopened on Broadway in November 2001, was nominated for a Tony Award as Best Play and ran 777 performances.

He recently starred in the film version of his play *Die, Mommie, Die* with Natasha Lyonne (*But I'm A Cheerleader, Party Monster*) and Frances Conroy (*Six Feet Under*) for which he won a 2003 Sundance Film Festival award for best performance.

In the winter of 2003, Busch starred in a new production of his play *Shanghai Moon* opposite B.D. Wong (*Mulan, Seven Years in Tibet*) for which he was nominated for a Lucille Lortel award and a Drama League Award. He was also given a special award for career achievement at the 2003 Drama Desk Awards. For two seasons he appeared as Nat Ginzburg in the HBO series *Oz*. In 2004, Busch wrote the book to the Broadway musical *Taboo* starring Boy George, directed by Christopher Renshaw, and produced by Rosie O'Donnell. His first novel "Whores of Lost Atlantis" was published in hardcover by Hyperion Press and released as a Penguin paperback. Busch graduated from Northwestern University and is a member of the Dramatist's Guild.



## The Lady in Question is Charles Busch

(Docu)

A Two Lions Production. Produced by John Catania, Charles Ignacio. Executive producer, Daryl Roth. Directed by John Catania, Charles Ignacio.

With: Charles Busch, Eric Myers, Julie Halston, B.D. Wong, Kathleen Turner, Michael Musto, [Paul Rudnick](#), Rosie O'Donnell, Boy George.

By [JOHN ANDERSON](#)

For those who grow nostalgic over the hard-shell/big-hearted glamour of old Hollywood, directors John Catania and Charles Ignacio offer up Charles Busch -- grande dame of drag and the subject of "The Lady in Question is Charles Busch." An affectionate, energetic documentary, it targets the existing fans of Busch's Broadway and off-Broadway exploits, but is likely to win a lot of converts, too -- largely through Busch's endearing personality.

Told in a talking head-meets-flashback style, replete with yards of fabric and footage, "The Lady in Question" (the title of a Busch off-Broadway show) rolls out in the same way as many of Busch's favorite old movies -- particularly "Auntie Mame." Having lost his mother at age 7, Busch was rescued by his aunt, Lilian Blum, who shanghaied him from the suburbs to Manhattan and exposed young Charles to the kinds of art (and artifice) that

has informed his work from his salad days in East Village hellholes to his two-year Broadway run with "The Tale of the Allergist's Wife."

Some of Busch's early collaborators are missing from the film, largely because of the AIDS plague, which claimed so many among the gay, artistic community of New York during the late '80s -- when the film gets to this period, the mood understandably shifts, and the early energy ebbs.

But others are around to sing Busch's praises, including longtime partner Eric Myers, longtime ingenue Julie Halston and various observers of the New York stage scene.

The film is rich in archival footage of Busch's earliest attempts to carve out his niche, including film from the original "Vampire Lesbians of Sodom," for instance, which began as a lark and became an East Village

institution. This was followed by "Theodora, She-Bitch of Byzantium" and other efforts at cross-dressing insanity, followed by glossier production of Busch work (and eventually, films) such as "The Lady in Question," "Red Scare on Sunset," "Psycho Beach Party" and "Die Mommie Die."

The real engine of the movie, of course, is Busch's stage persona, which may alter a bit from role to role but always maintains the brassiness of Eve Arden and the clueless bravado of Norma Shearer. (If there were a template Busch movie, it would be "The Women.")

Busch is a New York institution, and "The Lady in Question" is a worthy and entertaining tribute.

Camera (color, DV), Dane Lawing, Tim Newman, Peter Scheer; editor, Catania; co-editors, Jon Baskin, Ignacio; sound, John Wiggins; makeup, Louis E. Braun; associate producer, Richard Davis. Reviewed at Tribeca Film Festival, April 26, 2005. Running time: 90 MIN.