

**One San Francisco Play's Gender Journey
From the "Neli-Deli" Sandwich Shop
at Dave's Baths to the Queer Stage...**

Lost Photographs, Found Genders

Pioneering Gay Theater in San Francisco in the 1970s

Coming Attractions: Kweenasheba (1975)
was adapted by the author from his story
"Sweet Embraceable You" (1972).

The beloved San Francisco character actor Michael Lewis introduced me to producer and actor Joe Campanella of the all-male Yonkers Production Company that produced my play *Coming Attractions* (aka *Kweenasheba*) in 1976, the year after Campanella himself co-starred in *My Fair Laddie* with head-liner Empress-ario Jose Sarria at the Royal Palace, 335 Jones Street. That Tenderloin venue was not far from the South of Market "Society for Individual Rights' SIR Center Theater," 83 Sixth Street, known, because of its spill of derelict winos propping up the sidewalk, by its camp name, "Wine Country," because that block of Sixth was then a filthy Skid Row providing perfect sanctuary for gay theater coming out of the closet.

The SIR organization produced theatrical events from 1964-1976, and published *Vector* magazine from 1965-1977. In a line of theatrical descent, the year after the free-styling SIR organization

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closed camp with its double-bill of Lanford Wilson's *The Madness of Lady Bright* and my play, the newly founded Theater Rhinoceros opened its doors with its own remounting of Wilson's riff on Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois in *Lady Bright*.

The five-foot-six elfin Michael Lewis was a great performer of any gender. He was legendary as the Lion in the San Francisco camp staging of *The Wizard of Oz*. We met one rainy December afternoon in 1975 at Dave's Baths across from the foot of the new TransAmerica Pyramid in the 500 block of Washington Street, a couple doors west of Sansome Street. Michael ran a little shop inside Dave's Baths where he whipped up desserts and coffee. He called it with a wink: the Neli-Deli. I ordered a sandwich, soup, and decaf. It was a slow day at the tubs, and, between gentlemen callers, I had been editing my script in my tiny dark cubicle which was no beach *cabine*, and brought it with me to sit on a well-lighted barstool at the deli service-counter window. I was barefoot with a white towel wrapped round my waist. We struck up a conversation.

As in all good show business stories, within an hour, we had met cute and were bonded and discussing pairing my one-act with a second one-act, *Lady Bright*, in which Michael was already cast to play the title role.

Pirandello would have approved: Michael was one character in search of an author.

He needed a companion play that would not charge royalties. Seeing that he was the force rather much in charge of creating a double bill for a proper evening's entertainment for Yonkers, I suggested he do a kind of dual-role double feature, and play the lead part of the flamboyant Curtis in my play because he was perfect, to the point of type-casting, for the part.

He and Campanella and I discussed, with Jose Sarria (SIR founder, 1963), the fact that my play featured two evolving men, and two straight women, living together behind a flower shop on Castro Street in 1972. I based that shop on my pal Tommy Zalewski's pioneering urban nursery and gardening shop "Tommy's

Plants” at 566 Castro Street where the hale, hearty, and handsome big blond Tommy—come to Castro from Wisconsin—entertained hot locals and tourist tricks with fat joints and quickie fun in his upstairs office.

Yonkers wanted to cast four men from their talent pool which would have essentially changed the psycho-sexual narrative of my play while adding little but camp to it—which all these diverse years later might be great fun to try. In those olden days, I had been warned against such stunt casting by the example of Edward Albee who, while he approved interracial casting, insisted on cisgender casting for *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. I had composed for two male actors, and two female actors, because I envisioned a “coming out” comedy whose crusading political point was to *include* and *dramatize* the women—Ada, straight middle-class, and Kweenie, fluid counter-cultural—who in the emerging antics of gay culture in the 1970s were too often forgotten as collateral damage when men, like Robert Mapplethorpe, went gay leaving them, like Patti Smith, all too often behind. Hence, the cautionary title: *Coming Attractions*.

I wanted to examine that particular situation comedy of errors. So when Yonkers understood why I requested gender similitude dramatically and politically, these liberationist theater folk who were anxious to evolve on the subject of gender, made note that although they identified as an all-male company, they were happy to assist such diversified casting. Producer Joe Campanella wrote in the program: “You may ask why Yonkers is involved in serious theatre at this time. The answer is that we, as a production company, feel it is time to express ourselves in a different light. Why should we limit our goals to all-male drag and camp when there are other areas of entertainment to explore. We have a responsibility and commitment to the audience to provide worthwhile theatre, and we feel that tonight’s presentation is worthy of your time. As Chairman of Yonkers, one of my first accomplishments was to revise our by-laws so that any person, male or female, would be able to audition and

take part in any future production. My basic theory is that the best person for the role—male or female, if that person is the best, then he or she deserves the part. We need to branch out in our casting.”

Even so, I was pretty much on my own to find such women.

I had to get creative. I asked my hip and hippie sister and house mate, Mary Claire Fritscher, who at age eighteen was eighteen years younger than I, and a star newly graduated from her high-school and community theater experience of performing the femme fatale “Appassionata von Climax” in *Li'l Abner* and choreographing *Oklahoma!* to stop by the open casting call, and walk right in and audition anonymously on her own merit, identifying herself simply as “Mary Claire,” for the role of Kweenie, which was rather much based on her alternative feminist personality in the first place. Her example helped me create two strong roles for women. Without any input from me, Michael Lewis, Joe Campanella, and director Jack Green made all casting decisions. Two weeks into rehearsals after Mary Claire had proven her acting chops and her geniality to all concerned, we siblings announced our backstage ploy to much approving laughter and applause.

Secondly, when Jack Green’s choice for Ada, Jeanne Nathans, suddenly got a part in a film, I asked my pal, the elegant Catherine White, to audition for Ada because of her own personal sophistication and because we had the time of our young lives playing the pregnant hippie bride and beaded hippie husband leads in Broadway playwright and screenwriter William Goodhart’s 1965 “Generation Gap” comedy, *Generation*, at the Kalamazoo Civic Theater in May 1968. The production, directed by the British theatrical legend Bertram Tanswell, was well received and its run was extended. Catherine was also a dancer who had choreographed *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* for the Civic Theater. She and her husband, with their new baby, had just moved to San Francisco, and she agreed to “come out of retirement” as a favor since we had gotten along so well on and off stage during *Generation*.

Then there was the role of the straight John Vicary. For a year,

I had been friends with the actor Bob Paulson who leased an old-fashioned open-air sidewalk florist kiosk across the street from the Castro Theater. We first met, also cute, standing under his colorful canvas awning in a soft winter rain while I bought one of his delicate rose bouquets. He and I also bonded taking an exam together when the San Francisco Sheriff was recruiting gay men. We both scored. I came in as Deputy Candidate number eleven, but I turned down the job which he took. So he was an authentic new deputy sheriff who was a veteran actor in dozens of San Francisco plays including *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Pal Joey*, and *Little Mary Sunshine*. (His co-star Mary Claire had also starred the year before in another production of *Little Mary Sunshine*.) His manly presence, brooding matinee-idol looks, and gregarious personality were ideal for the role of John Vicary who also owned a flower shop.

When my longtime sporting buddy, Jack Green, a credentialed and experienced theater director, agreed to direct *Coming Attractions*, I was delighted because in our group of new immigrants reconstituting ourselves *en masse* in San Francisco, we were all inventing new lives, new roles, and new ways of befriending each other while transferring our talent, hearts, and humanity from homophobic towns and cities from which we had fled as sex refugees trying to carry on the natural narratives of our lives.

Late nights, after rehearsals and after performances, our cast and crew retired for food and drink at Pam Pam's coffee shop, open 24/7, one block west of Union Square, 398 Geary Street at Mason, mixing sometimes with professional actors from proper playhouses just across the street, like the American Conservatory Theater's Geary Theater, and the Curran Theater where film director Joseph Mankiewicz shot the "Broadway theater" exteriors and interiors for *All About Eve*.

Lucky for us happy friends rehearsing at SIR, Eve never showed.

In 2017, my dear friend, the photographer and author Jim Stewart was searching his files of negatives and found rehearsal photographs both of us had forgotten existed. We had met in 1973,

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and when he moved to San Francisco in 1975, he lived with me and my sister at our home for six months before moving to the artsy bohemian Clementina Street where he began shooting for *Drummer* magazine, which I had the good fortune of editing for three years (1977-1980).

Drummer often published plays like *Pogey Bait* and *Isomer* and *Corporal in Charge of Taking Care of Captain O'Malley*. *Pogey Bait* was written by 1960s Off-Off-Broadway playwright and Gay Games bodybuilder George Birimisa of Caffè Cino and Theater Rhinoceros who produced *Pogey Bait*. *Isomer* was by Richard A. Steel, a pioneer of New York's Circle Repertory Company, who was also an associate of Sam Shepard and a good friend of Lanford Wilson. My closet drama *Corporal in Charge* was the only play the revered publisher Winston Leyland included in his canonical anthology and Lammy Award Winner, *Gay Roots: Twenty Years of Gay Sunshine - An Anthology of Gay History, Sex, Politics, and Culture* (1991).

Stewart's lost negatives of *Coming Attractions*, shot on the SIR Center's stage, with available light, were dusty and damaged, and have been restored as much as possible for archival purposes by Mark Henry. The perversatile Stewart, to whom I am so grateful, soon after, only a few blocks from the SIR Center, was the designer and carpenter who built the interior of Oscar Streaker Robert Opel's Fey-Way Studio, 1287 Howard Street, the first gay art gallery in San Francisco, where Opel was murdered in 1979. Author Stewart's 2011 hello-and-goodbye to all that was his best-selling memoir, *Folsom Street Blues*.

Back in that primitive first decade after Stonewall, *Coming Attractions* may have been the first play written on Castro Street (1975) about life on Castro Street. It played weekends to full houses for a month and was noticed on the cover of *The Bay Area Reporter* and in the arts "Pink Section" of the *San Francisco Chronicle*.*

**The Bay Area Reporter*, Volume 6 #5, March 4, 1976, and "Date Book Arts and Entertainment" Pink Section of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, March 21, 1976

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**Notes for *Coming Attractions* from the
Yonkers Production Company Program
by Perry George**

Coming Attractions [aka *Kweenasheba*] was first produced by the Yonkers Production Company, San Francisco, premiering March 13, 1976, at the Society for Individual Rights SIR Center Theatre, 83 Sixth Street, San Francisco. Joe Campanella, Producer. Directed by Jack Green. Photography by Eye-Onic. *Coming Attractions* was double-billed in a program of two one-act plays with *The Madness of Lady Bright* by Lanford Wilson, and was noticed as the cover of the weekly newspaper, the *B.A.R.*, *The Bay Area Reporter*, Volume 6 #5, March 4, 1976, and in the “Date Book—Arts and Entertainment” Pink Section of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday, March 21, 1976. [*Coming Attractions* may be the first gay play written and produced in San Francisco reflecting the actuality of the gender mix in early 1970s emerging gay culture on Castro Street.

CAST

In order of appearance:

John Stack: Bob Paulson

Ada: Catherine White

Curtis: Mike Lewis

Kweenasheba: Mary Claire Fritscher

JACK FRITSCHER

Playwright

Jack is an Illinois Gemini who played in Peoria (and Chicago and New York) before arriving, five years ago, in the Gemini City of Oz. His first produced play, for which he wrote the book and lyrics with Lawrence Brandt, was the musical-comedy, *Continental Caper* (1959). He has acted in *Oliver!* and T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*. He played the lead in the hippie comedy, *Generation*, and the five male leads in the musical-comedy, *Canterbury Tales*, also appearing fleetingly in *The Streets of San Francisco*. He

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has published two books, *Television Today* and *Popular Witchcraft: Straight from the Witch's Mouth* (Citadel Press). Currently he is working on a collection of San Francisco short stories while writing a TV movie, *Duchess: Berlin 1928*. He lives it up to write it down. *Kweenasheba* is dedicated to his lover of seven years, the photographer, David Sparrow.

JACK GREEN

Director

Born the day before Thanksgiving to a theatrical family in Duluth—that's right, a theatrical family in Duluth, Minnesota, Jack fled from the frozen northland at an early age. At a more mature age, he received a B.A. in Theatre Arts at UCLA, after which he became Founder/Director of the "Fifth Corner" company in Los Angeles, an ensemble presenting Off-Off-Broadway plays. *Coming Attractions* makes both his Yonkers and San Francisco theatrical debut.

JOE CAMPANELLA

Producer and Chairman

Yonkers Production Co., Inc.

Yonkers is fortunate to have as its producer, the capable and talented, Joe Campanella, who has been active in all-male theatre in San Francisco for over ten years. Most recently, he played the male lead in *Blithe Spirit* for which he received a Cable Car Award nomination. His background in Gay Theatre includes two Yonkers productions, *That's Show Biz*, and *Michelle Plays the Palace*. Professionally, Joe works as a radio announcer at KEST Radio in San Francisco, and teaches a course in Radio and TV broadcasting. Since coming to San Francisco eleven years ago, Joe has appeared in productions with the Opera Ring, Interplayers, Playhouse, and at the Village in *Ready or Not It's Me* and *It's Me Again*. He also played opposite the famous Jose Sarria in many spoof operas.

Joe is current chairman of Yonkers, a titled member of the Royal Household of Grand Duchess Charlie, and the newly appointed Production Chairman of SIR Center. Joe writes: "You may ask why

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Yonkers is involved in serious theatre at this time. The answer is that we, as a production company, feel it is time to express ourselves in a different light. Why should we limit our goals to all-male drag and camp when there are other areas of entertainment to explore. We have a responsibility and commitment to the audience to provide worthwhile theatre, and we feel that tonight's presentation is worthy of your time. As Chairman of Yonkers, one of my first accomplishments was to revise our by-laws so that any person, male or female, would be able to audition and take part in any future production. My basic theory is 'the best person for the role—male or female'; if that person is the best, then he or she deserves the part. My hope with *The Madness of Lady Bright* by Lanford Wilson, and *Coming Attractions* by Jack Fritscher is to establish Yonkers as an open-minded theatrical company."

MICHAEL LEWIS

Curtis, *Coming Attractions*, and Leslie, *Lady Bright*
 Producer, *Coming Attractions*

Mike has been a familiar face to San Francisco audiences since 1970, making his "Golden Award" winning performance in the Yonkers Production of *Hello Dolly*, only to be followed by a long line of memorable roles in *The Boyfriend*, *Dames at Sea*, *Feather and Leather Follies*, *CMC Carnival*, and *Little Me*. More recently, Mike claims a Cable Car Award for his unforgettable role of the Lion in *Wizard of Oz*. Active in charities, his characterization as the Lion has been delighting audiences from the Shriners' Hospital to the *Jerry Lewis Telethon*. Mike is re-creating the role of Leslie in *The Madness of Lady Bright* from a previous production staged last year at San Francisco State University. You can find him performing to SRO crowds at his own business, the Neli-Deli, at Dave's Baths.

MARY CLAIRE FRITSCHER

Kweenasheba

From *Appassionata Von Climax* in the Peoria (Illinois) High School production of *Li'l Abner* to the focal leading lady (and

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Yonker's first actual female leading lady) in Yonker's San Francisco production of *Coming Attractions*—that's how far the eighteen-year-old ingenue, Mary Claire has come. Her varied experience has touched on every aspect of theatre: dancing, singing, acting, even set construction and decoration, make-up, children's theatre, and directing. Now she adds gay theatre to her credits. Her credits specifically include the lead in *Little Mary Sunshine*, *Archie and Mehitabel*, as well as dance director for the choreography for a community production of *Oklahoma!* As a "backstage musical" note, for Yonkers, she auditioned anonymously, as "Mary Claire," winning the role of Kweenasheba, written specifically for her by the author, her brother. They revealed their relationship at a party during the third week of rehearsal. She is a psychology major at City College of San Francisco, studying advanced acting, directing, and philosophy.

CATHERINE WHITE

Ada Vicary

Catherine moved to San Francisco with her husband three months ago from Michigan where she was active in the Kalamazoo Community Theatre. Her credits there include an extended run in the hippie comedy, *Generation*, playing the female lead opposite Jack Fritscher who invited her to step into the role of Ada when actress Jeanne Nathans landed a part in an upcoming film. Six months ago, Catherine gave birth to her newest production, a son, who can sometimes be heard backstage, rehearsing.

BOB PAULSON

John Stack

Handsome Bob Paulson, is a newly sworn and openly gay San Francisco deputy sheriff, whose acting credits include fifteen musicals for Woodminster Summer Musicals in Oakland, notably, George Musgrove in *Little Me*, Hysterium in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, Mottel the Tailor in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and James Wilson in *1776*. He also appeared as Arthur Swan in *No Man's Land* and the Gardner in *The Vigil* for Producers

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Associates in Oakland. For SIR he has appeared as Ludlow Lowell in *Pal Joey*, Capt. Jim in *Little Mary Sunshine*, and Marcus Lycus in *Forum*. He also directed *Anything Goes* with Michelle, and has appeared in numerous SIR-lebri-te Capades and Revues for SIR. His set design credits include, for SIR, *Anything Goes*, *Madness '71*, and *Hello Dolly* for SIR and Yonkers. He also designed *Dames at Sea* for Kimo Productions. Coincidentally “type-cast” as John, the owner of a flower shop, Bob, until he was recently picked for the first group of openly gay deputy sheriffs, was the manager of a flower shop on Castro Street.

“YONKERS DOES GAY THEATRE
WITH TWO DRAMATIC ONE-ACT PLAYS”

by Perry George

Reprinted from *Yonkers Free Press*

Yonkers is proud and happy to offer to our theatre-going public a whole new facet, for us, of theatrical endeavor in two one-act plays, *The Madness of Lady Bright* by Lanford Wilson, and *Coming Attractions* by Jack Fritscher. The pairing of these two plays, Yonkers Productions Company’s Sixth major endeavor, is not an all-male musical comedy or revue. There is no expensive union orchestra, lavish sequined and feathered costumes, stunningly choreographed production numbers or singing, that have given us the spectacular reputation we have.

It is not Yonkers’ intention to abandon this type of theatre, which we have pleased audiences with again and again from *Hello Dolly*, *The Boy Friend*, *Little Me*, *Michelle Plays the Palace*, to *That’s Show Biz*, but to enhance this achievement with a branching out, a theatrical coming-of-age and an emergence to the dynamic times this theatre group, our City, state, and nation are arriving at in encouraging and recognizing the blossoming of relevant Gay Theatre where a positive and honest mirror image of ourselves and our friends, as members of the gay and general community, can have both entertainment and insight.

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The first play, *Coming Attractions*, an original play by the local playwright, Jack Fritscher, will receive its world premiere and is a vignette of a life-style very likely to be familiar from the neighborhoods of San Francisco to anyone who sees this play. *Coming Attractions* deals with homosexuality in a matter-of-fact positive way, with the homosexual living “happily-ever-after”—no suicides, no murders, none of all the strangely unnecessary retribution that seems inevitable in most gay-themed drama we are exposed to in the “straight world” theatrical productions. It is our belief that the turn of this tide of negativity must start from the Gay Community as it does not seem likely it will from the Straight Community.

Also aware of the fact that all within gay life and the Gay Community is not like a “Gidget Goes Gay” kind of movie, and remembering our often traumatic and painful past, we offer Lanford Wilson’s compelling drama, *The Madness of Lady Bright*, a study in the complete schizophrenic breakdown of an ageing fading failure of an effeminate homosexual on a very hot, hot night in New York City. Everyone in the audience cannot avoid seeing a little, a lot, and perhaps too much of Leslie Bright in themselves or someone dear to them.

It is unwise to single out one performer from the many who work so hard to entertain the audiences who see our shows, but I cannot conclude without saying the compelling, powerful, and sensitive performances I have seen blossoming in Mike Lewis as Leslie (Lady) Bright, and as Curtis, “the real Kweeasheba,” throughout rehearsals of these two shows will be worth the price of admission for all who see his double tour-de-force. *Lady Bright*, which also stars Shel Kovalski, is directed by Andrew Barron; assistant director, William Howard.

Tickets for this double-bill of one-act shows are available at Macy’s Box Office, The Record House, and the Kokpit Bar. They are for unreserved seating and are \$4 each, March 13, 14, 20, 21, 27, and 28. After the closing night performance, there will be a cast and audience party at the Kokpit Bar, 301 Turk Street.

CREDITS: *The Madness of Lady Bright*, written by Lanford Wilson, courtesy of Dramatists Play Service; directed by Andrew Barron. *Coming Attractions*, written by Jack Fritscher, courtesy of Spitting Image/Palm Drive; directed by Jack Green. Both plays produced for Yonkers Production Company by Joe Campanella; sets by Bob Paulsen; lighting and sound, Bill Hirsing; program notes and design, Perry George and Bob Cramer; stage manager, Rod Schaefer; crew, Randy Totten; photography, EYE-ONIC; special thanks to Jim Briggs, Mark Barrett, Record House, Kokpit, Dennis Coonan, Bert Arthur, Tadd Waggoner, SIR Board of Directors, and Exactly That Productions.



Top: (L) A pensive Bob Paulson (R) Michael Lewis and Bob Paulson
Bottom: Mary Claire Fritscher and Catherine White. Photos: Jim Stewart



Top: Catherine White and Mary Claire Fritscher rehearse on set
Bottom: Ada (Catherine White) challenges the ironic hipster Kweenasheba (Mary Claire Fritscher). Photos: Jim Stewart



Top: (L) Mary Claire Fritscher and Catherine White (R) Catherine White
Bottom: Director Jack Green and Mary Claire Fritscher. Photos: Jim Stewart



Top: Michael Lewis (Curtis), Mary Claire Fritscher (Kweenasheba), Bob Paulson (John Vicary), and Catherine White (Ada Vicary)

Bottom: Michael Lewis, Mary Claire Fritscher, Bob Paulson, listen attentively to Catherine White. Photos: Jim Stewart



Top: The always buoyant Michael Lewis with Mary Claire Fritscher, Bob Paulson, and Catherine White

Bottom: Rob Schaefer, Stage Manager; Bill Hirsing, Lighting and Sound; Randy Totten, Crew. Photos: Jim Stewart



With director Jack Green, tall and center, Michael Lewis, Mary Claire Fritscher, Bob Paulson, and Catherine White. Photo: Jim Stewart



Jack Fritscher, Catherine White, and Franklin Smith, *Generation*, May 1968, Kalamazoo Civic Theater



Franklin Smith, Jack Fritscher, and Catherine White, *Generation*, May 1968, Kalamazoo Civic Theater



Top: Michael Lewis and Jack Fritscher, West Hollywood, 1989. Photo: Mark Hemry

Bottom: Jack Green, 1977. Photo: Jack Fritscher

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“Lanford Wilson
writes with
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Yonkers Presents

“COMING ATTRACTIONS”
by Jack Fritscher

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