

INTERVIEW

Lipsinka

by John Smith

Illustration: Robert Dyck Anderson



John Smith: How long were you in Chicago?

Lypynka: Only two nights, unfortunately.

JS: Did you have an opportunity to do anything? I've been to Chicago many times, but only in February. I used to come with the American Ballet Theatre.

JS: You were their rehearsal pianist. Are you still doing that?

L: (Emphatically) No!

JS: So you devote all your time to performing?

L: Yes, it's much more emotionally rewarding to perform and meet interesting people than to be the lowest person on the totem pole.

JS: I certainly imagine Lypynka doesn't like being the lowest person on the totem pole. You bring an incredible intensity to your performance. Does it take you long to get into that character?

L: Oh no, I've never had any trouble. I just do it.

JS: How about coming out of the character?

L: I have no trouble with that either. I can't wait to get out of that stuff.

JS: I've read that you are from Jackson, Mississippi.

L: Actually I'm from Hazlehurst, Mississippi.

JS: Is Jackson the nearest hotspot?

L: Well, if there is one.

JS: Those drag queens you wrote about in *My Camarade* sound interesting.

L: That was the 1970's. I don't think they've progressed much...in fact, they've probably regressed.

JS: They remind me of drag queens I knew in the 70's from Paducah, Kentucky, who drove pickup trucks with shotguns in the back window.

L: Like most all the rest of the entertainment history in the world, those Southern drag queens got stale. In the 70's everything was a lot more interesting. At the time, people were saying, "Oh, movies are over," but when you look back, they were a lot more interesting than what's going on now.

JS: I hate people who trash 70's culture. Do you consider that your formative period?

L: My formative period started the day I was born. But the 70's were a much more liberal era, looking back one can see what an exciting time it was.

JS: Do you refer to yourself as a drag queen, actor, female impersonator... How do you pre-

drag/club scene?

L: No, I came to New York as green as they come.

JS: Had you been before?

L: I had been three years earlier with my mother when all I did was see Broadway show after Broadway show. In the summer of 1978, I finally said I'm ready to move.

JS: After that first trip, was every minute of your life devoted to finding a way to get there?

L: (Laughing) Yes. There actually was one other time I tried to move but I keep forgetting about it, it was really a bad scene. It didn't work out.

JS: But you got there!

L: For about six weeks. The second time it took. It was L.A. or New York and in Mississippi you have to drive a car and mine kept breaking down, so I decided that New York was the place. Plus theater is easier to break into than film.

JS: In the 70's were you aware of performers like Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatre Company? Did that intrigue you?

L: It definitely intrigued me. I didn't set out to become a drag performer by moving to New York, but it was always in the back of my mind that it was something I could try. I certainly was fascinated by him (Ludlam) and by Holly Woodlawn, Charles Pierce and Divine. But I had only read about these people. I had never seen them do anything. There used to be a magazine called *After Dark*, you couldn't even get it in Mississippi you had to drive to New Orleans.

JS: Do you think growing up in that kind of isolation helped your personality ferment?

I've sacrificed a great deal of my personal life. I haven't seen my family in one and a half years.

JS: You've been performing Lypynka for one and a half years!

L: I had a long stagnant period for about a year, but about nine months ago I came out here and had a huge success around Thankgiving.

JS: Was that the club act or your play, "I Could Go On Lip-Synching!"

L: It was the show I'm doing now. It's called "The Fabulous Lypynka Show," and it's a cabaret act. And then I went to L.A. with it and came back here immediately and had an even bigger success. And in the meantime, "I Could Go On Lip-Synching" had been in negotiations for about two years to open in L.A. and it finally did in March of this year. I did four months there which brings us up to the Chicago show and now I'm in California again.

JS: When do you go back to New York?

L: I'm going back mid-August and might be performing at the Balroom in the last two weeks of August. The Balroom is a high-profile cabaret where Peggy Lee, Eartha Kitt, Rosemary Cooney, Julie Wilson, and people like that perform.

JS: That's quite a legacy. Are those people you admire, cabaret performers, or are you drawn more to the larger-than-life Ethel Merman types?

L: I admire them all.

JS: Do you have any specific idols or influences?

L: Dolores Grey, who is really the emotional prototype of Lypynka. She made a few films at MGM in the 50's, that can be rented. "The Opposite Sex," was one, "It's Always Fair Weather," was another, "Kismet," and "Designing Woman."

JS: What character is she in "Designing Woman?"

L: She's the

television star that Gregory Peck leaves for Lauren Bacall.

JS: Who is another?

L: Kay Thompson. She was in the movie "Funny Face" with Audrey Hepburn and Fred Astaire. She does the number "Think Pink."

JS: That's a great production number. Have you ever done that?

L: No, not the whole thing, but bits of it. She's still alive, but she doesn't do



"Yes, the face must be worked."

fer to be characterized?

L: I consider myself an actor playing a female role.

JS: Do you feel you have a range that could go beyond Lypynka?

L: Oh, yes. But this is what has caught on with the public.

JS: With good reason. Were the people you knew when you came to New York part of the

L: Well, when you can't get that kind of gratification, you become obsessive about it, and then obsession turns into a career.

JS: Are you obsessed with your career?

L: I don't know if I'm obsessed, but I spend most of my time dealing with it.

Lypynka in performance at the Vortex in Chicago. Photo Scott Free.

anything. She wrote the "Eloise" books about the little girl who lives at the Plaza Hotel. She was also a great arranger and disc person at MGM. She was Judy Garland's vocal coach and she's Liza's godmother. She had quite an amazing career.

JS: Have you met her?

L: No, she's not meetable. She's a recluse. I do have her address and telephone number. Carol Burnett is also one of my idols.

JS: That I can really see in the physical quality of your performance. Have you had any professional dance training? Your body is so expressive.

L: I have, but that's. I started too late to be a real dancer, had that is really what I've become. As we're speaking I have ice on my knees, because they hurt so bad. So I guess I'm a dancer.

JS: I was watching you perform on a Wigstock video the other night. There were closeups of your face which were remarkable. Extremely expressive.

L: Yes, the face must be worked.

JS: Do you practice in front of a mirror?

L: Yes, but if you saw me off stage you wouldn't even know it was the same person.

JS: Do people treat you differently than they do when you are Lypsinka?

L: People naturally treat a man in a dress differently than they do when you're not in a dress. I'm also treated differently when someone meets me and they find out who I am.

JS: Do you find any resistance in the gay community to drag queens? It seems there has been a great rediscovery of the importance of drag.

L: There is definitely something going on, enabling it to be accepted as a mainstream art form. It's been going on for quite awhile now and you would have thought it would have run its course.

JS: Do you see the opportunity to continue what you're doing for quite some time?

L: I certainly see the possibility. I don't know if the people who can help me maintain that do. I've had some interest from TV and film people. That would be the best test on whether or not this would go mainstream.

JS: Are you getting backing from Madonna?

L: I am getting backing from her, yes.

JS: How did this come about?

L: She came to see "The Fabulous Lypsinka Show," when I was doing it in L.A., around Christmas time. Sandra Bernhard wanted to come because Isaac Mizrahi had been telling her about me, and she never had a chance. She was in town and so was I. A friend of mine who knows Alok Kashishian said he should go see the show, so between the two of them, it just fell into place that Madonna would come see it.

JS: Had you been a fan of Madonna?

L: Frankly, not really. The only thing she had done before "Vogue" that interested me was the "Material Girl" video because it was a clever take on the "Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend" number. When

she came out with "Vogue," I thought, "Well, voguing has already had its day in the underground in New York," but when I saw the video I realized this was something, plus the song is really catchy. Last year when she did it on MTV Awards, that style of movement she was doing...I've seen dancers at the American Ballet Theatre try to do, but she had all the subtleties of the way people moved during the Marie Antoinette era. I was so impressed with her dancing, plus she was fun. I had never seen her be funny before. So there was some interest on my part. When she came to the show, I thought, "Oh, isn't this great! Here's Madonna." We met afterwards and she was very nice. A couple of days later, I got a phone call from our mutual friend telling me Madonna wanted me to perform at her Christmas party, which was the next day. I said that would be great and I would love to come to the party, but I can't perform unless she's going to pull it together. I need a stage, I need lights, I need sound. I can't just show up and do a show. So he said, "Well, if she still wants you, she'll call you herself," and she didn't call.

The people who were planning to produce "I Could Go On Lip-Synching," were coming to see the cabaret act every night bringing potential investors and they knew Madonna had been there. One of them worked for Propaganda Films which produced "Truth or Dare," and he got in touch with her and said we would send a prospectus. About two weeks later I got a call in New York saying Madonna is an investor. She also did a photo session with me.

JS: Do you find that there's a difference between the crowd that comes to see you on the East and the West coasts, or the Midwest. Do they have different expectations?

L: Well, San Francisco and New York audiences are very much the same.

JS: In Chicago, I think you were an unknown quantity to many of the people at the Vortex, they weren't at all sure what to expect.

L: While I was onstage, looking at the audience I could see in many of the faces that they were thinking, "What is it?" It is always much more gratifying when they get obscure references, but, to their credit, that audience paid attention. They may not have understood everything, but they did pay attention, especially down front.

JS: I was in the back and you certainly had no problem projecting that far. Do you prefer a theater to working in a club like the Vortex?

L: Yes, when people are sitting down they have a longer and better attention span.

JS: You've said that drag, or playing a female role isn't all you can do. But do you think that lip-synching gives you a freedom you might not otherwise have?

L: Lip-synching gives me freedom to move more. That's the reason Madonna lip-synchs on stage. She's dancing her butt off. But I do plan to get away from lip-synching, but not give up the name Lypsinka... I have a whole, elaborate plan.

JS: I have no doubt about that. I want to know about the Temptations number you did at the Vortex. People were really thrown off by that.

L: [Laughing] Yes, but they started rocking out.

JS: That, and "The Telephone" piece. Did that just come to you one day when your own phone had been ringing off the hook?

L: Actually, I just realized that I had all these recordings about telephone stuff.

JS: It's a remarkable archive of material.

L: A lot of stuff you saw wasn't originally part of the "The Telephone" number. The stuff I originally did was like "Telephone Lover" that Connie Francis did, then I began to realize that you can just take anything and make a sample of it. The telephone is a universal thing that drives everyone crazy, everyone can relate to it.

JS: Does it continue to evolve?

L: I play around with it. It's what people remember most about me. What people always comment on first.

JS: What a trademark. I've always wanted to answer the phone saying, "Why don't you die!"

L: When I start to analyze why this character is so appealing to people it's because it's like early Bette Midler, who says things everyone wants to see but propriety and society keeps them from saying.

JS: Is Lypsinka that character for you? Do you do and say things as Lypsinka that John Epperson wouldn't say?

L: It's definitely a catharsis.

JS: Do you feel that it's revenge?

L: I've gotten a form of revenge. When I was growing up, I was amidst in a small town when people made fun of me and I've taken my mistress and turned it into a career and ended up in the pages of People magazine with the most famous woman in the world. How many people in my hometown got to do this?

JS: And the people in Hazlehurst knew that was you!

L: Oh they knew.

JS: That's a great kind of revenge. Does it bother you when someone like Sandra Bernhard capitalizes on the drag queen tradition?

L: No, we're fellow postmodernists and kongrats.

JS: I love hearing you refer to yourself as a postmodernist, because that was one of my first impressions of you.

L: Well, it had to be explained to me. I always just called myself a nostalgia buff, but because people expect me to analyze myself more readily, I've learned what postmodernism is.

JS: You also said that you are very serious about not being serious.

L: Well, a lot of people think I'm boring because I don't go out every night, but I don't want to go to another smoky bar. After a show, I want to go soak in a hot tub somewhere. ♥

T W I N G

Number 5 • \$3

REALNESS!

real love
VOICE FARM

real face
LYPSINKA

real fierce
**ESSEX
HEMPHILL**

real hype
**BILL
COLEMAN**

real looks
**QUEER
FASHION**

real dirt

T E E

real dish

BUNNY & PUS

real trade

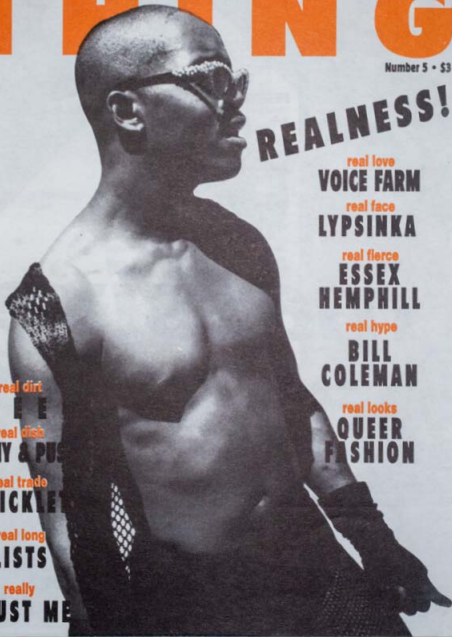
CHICKLET

real long

LISTS

really

TRUST ME



contents

EVERYTHING TO GO

Things that make you go...hmm. The long awaited faggy newsy stuff from faggy newsy people. You know, Spew, Music, Trust Me, Kiss Off, Niggerati, etc.

6

FEATURES

Tod Roulette talks to **Essex Hemphill** about being black and gay, and loving fiercely.

18

We wondered, what would happen if art archivist and performer **John Smith** had the chance to talk with New York's premiere cross-over, cross-dressing performance wonder **Lypsinka**?

Listen up.

21

Promoter **Bill Coleman** is one in a million. As head of his own Peace Bisquit Productions, he's a major force behind acts like **Deee-Lite**, **Ultra Naté**, and **Basscut**.

All this and OUT, too!

24

Fierce Fashion Boy-boy club-looks see the light of day.

Photographs by **Stephen Winter**.

28

DEPARTMENTS

...the Mother of all lists.

17

FICTION: Gregory Conerly's "Death of a Queen".

POETRY: "Negotiations" by Robert Klein Engler.

32

Bunny and Pussy play can-you-top-this with low-low-can-you-go.

Plus, "To Live and Whore in La-La Land" by LA's **Chicklet**.

37

TEE out & about with **TA** plus Tee Glossary.

38

MEMORIAL: Joe Lindsay remembered by **Madrid St. Angelo**

plus more folks we'll miss.

44

Ask **Marjorie Marginal**...if you dare.

46

COVER AND THIS PAGE Photograph of Jeff Britton by Stephen Winter. Styled by Paul Stura.

