

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Mamp, Michael, "'I'm a Stand-up Comic in a Dress:" Charles Pierce" (2017). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 59.

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“I’m a Stand-up Comic in a Dress:” Charles Pierce

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Keywords: Charles Pierce, female impersonator, camp

For about forty years Charles Pierce (1926-1999) entertained audiences across the United States and abroad. Pierce, who preferred the term “male actress” eschewed the moniker of drag queen or female impersonator. However, Pierce’s persona was clearly defined by sartorial choice and the imitation of female silver screen legends. Pierce performed in night clubs, cabaret, concert halls, television, and in feature films. His use of costume combined with exaggerated mannerisms brought to life characters such as Tallulah Bankhead, Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Joan Crawford, and Carol Channing among many others. Pierce’s unique brand of comedy appealed to diverse audiences despite exaggerated camp characterization and a queered double entendre heavy commentary. His use of costume to create his ladies evolved over his career from working in a tuxedo with a box of props, to a more realistic illusion achieved via costume and makeup.<sup>1</sup>

His management of identity through costume not only facilitated a career, but also blurred gender lines and challenged a heteronormative status quo. As if with foresight, Pierce carefully documented his career depositing materials at both the New York Library for the Performing Arts as well as at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California. The latter holding extant examples of Pierce’s costumes and accessories. In addition, Pierce participated in an oral history project organized by Southern Methodist University. Using these archival sources and primary print material this research both documents the life and career of the somewhat obscure Pierce, but also examines blurred concepts of gender, sexuality, performance, and queer camp sensibility.

Charles Pierce was born in Watertown New York in 1929 where he “began working as a radio announcer at 16 before moving to Los Angeles...to study acting at the Pasadena Playhouse.”<sup>2</sup> Early on in California, Pierce saw Arthur Blake perform in a nightclub. Blake did impressions, some male, mostly female, as part of his very campy act. This approach appealed to Pierce who aspired to be a character actor in the tradition of Richard Haydn, most remembered for his role as Uncle Max in the *Sound of Music*. It occurred to Pierce that he could create characters while also impersonating famous actresses. Pierce considered, “what if Bette Davis had played Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With the Wind*? What if Eleanor Roosevelt was coming back from Mexico with her big serape and hat?”<sup>3</sup>

Pierce first completed female impressions professionally at Club La Vie in Altadena, CA in 1954, additional appearances soon followed in Florida and New York. At first he “performed in

a tuxedo or black trousers and turtleneck...later...he rolled up his pants and donned a dress over his male attire.”<sup>4</sup> All at a time when local ordinances such as one in Miami, Florida made female impersonation illegal.<sup>5</sup> Another early technique employed by Pierce to avoid problems with law enforcement involved the use of a dressed puppet that he placed under his face.



Figure 1 Charles Pierce as Bette Davis at Freddy's NYC c. 1980. Charles Pierce Papers, Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Library for the Performing Arts.

Over time Pierce found that the characters needed fuller realization and therefore wore full women's attire. Elaborate gowns, combined with makeup and mannerism created an illusion of famous actresses (figure 1). In exaggerated dress, mimicking women with exaggerated personalities, Pierce became the very embodiment of camp.

According to Susan Sontag, "all camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice, nothing in nature can be campy."<sup>6</sup>

Audiences both gay and straight, male and female, appreciated his brand of campy comedy and Pierce successfully transitioned to regular television roles and the occasional film appearance including his performance as Bertha Venation in Harvey Fierstein's, *Torch Song Trilogy*. His longest standing continuous night club engagement was six years at the Gilded Cage in San Francisco.

In May of 1975 *Vogue* referred to Charles Pierce as a "new kind of funny woman," and quoted Pierce as saying, "I'm a stand-up comic in a dress."<sup>7</sup> Long before drag queens like Ru Paul were household

names, Charles Pierce brazenly approached a career in show business that proved gender norms were made to be broken. This research explores the life and career of Charles Pierce, and how sartorial choice fashioned a queer performance identity firmly rooted in camp sensibility.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Pierce, interview by Ronald L. Davis, July 22, 1989, interview 456, transcript. Southern Methodist University Oral History Project.

<sup>2</sup> "Charles Pierce, 72, Impersonator of Screen Divas," *New York Times* (New York, NY), June 13, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Pierce, interview, 7.

<sup>4</sup> "Charles Pierce," in *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era*, eds. Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, & Robert A. Schanke (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 311.

<sup>5</sup> "Arresting dress: A timeline of anti-cross-dressing laws in the United States," *PBS Newshour*, accessed April 1, 2017. <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/arresting-dress-timeline-anti-cross-dressing-laws-u-s/>

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1961), 279.

<sup>7</sup> "The Funniest Men in Town," *Vogue*, May 1975, 139.