

## Penny Arcade

When Ethyl Met Jackie

Being a stickler for lineage, I would have to make a correction and say, “When Ethyl Met Jackie”, because Jackie Curtis was the precursor for all drag that colored outside the lines of what was then colloquially called (in the gay world) ‘realness’. While Ethyl was two years older than Jackie, by 1967, Jackie, an indigenous Lower East Sider and hell bent on reinvention, had reorganized the entire concept of drag on the streets of downtown NY. Meanwhile Ethyl, the Midwesterner, had already graduated from the Academy of Dramatic Arts in NY, and would later spend seven years as the lead character actor of the prestigious regional theatre company, Trinity Rep. Jackie Curtis’s influence on downtown performance in the 1960’s was eclipsed somewhat in the 1970’s by the more formally organized and educated Charles Ludlam, but everyone, Ludlam included, understood that Curtis’s charisma existed both on and off the stage. Charles was an actor, and a great one, but Curtis was a force of nature.

I have no doubt Ethyl would have experienced Curtis’ triumphant cabaret performances in the 1970’s, because the pragmatic Ethyl drew heavily from the rich downtown avant-garde that produced not only Curtis and Ludlam but unique and iconic performers like Taylor Mead, Tally Brown, and Harry Koutoukas, among many others. Curtis was a feverish whirlwind driven by a wild blind ambition, buoyed by drugs and alcohol, and by 1970 Lee Black Childers iconic poster of Curtis, “What Becomes a Legend Most,” all glitter, false eyelashes, red lipstick and frizzy halo of hair, graced the Stones dressing room. Curtis was the only pin up who counted. Curtis’ reinvention of British music hall ditties, sitting on pianos with shredded black tights, galvanized the music business executives and PR people. As Curtis succumbed to a life long fascination with cabaret, eschewing the burgeoning punk scene in the mid 70’s for midtown and uptown rooms like The Rainbow Grill, Ethyl, then the lead actor at Trinity Rep in Providence, threw it away to join Ludlam, beginning his subversive climb to downtown greatness.

When I was asked to write about the relationship between the ideas of Curtis and Ethyl, my mind immediately dialed into the one great commonality they shared: Feminism. Both Ethyl and Curtis were diehard feminists who took the fight for women’s equality seriously. Both of them understood the plight of women, as well as the marginalization they both felt at the hand society’s prejudice dealt them, and they focused it thru the lens of the oppression of women. Both of these feminist artists gave me a hand at a critical time in my development.

While Jackie Curtis was a close friend as well as a formative and seminal influence on me as an actor and performer, Ethyl would also have a great effect on what would become my career.

In 1981, as I was rehearsing *Tinsel Town Tirade*, the last play by the Cockettes and Angels of Light founder Hibiscus, I took to entertaining Curtis (as many of his friends and family called him) on our rehearsal breaks by impersonating our old friend Andrea Whips. Andrea had killed herself in 1972, a decade earlier, just before her star vehicle, the Warhol film *Heat*, opened. Andrea was fun to imitate and I was a precision mimic, and found I could comment on the gentrification I saw in the 1981 East Village without drawing the ire I drew when I spoke of this in my own voice. Both Curtis and Hibiscus thought it was engaging and funny, and one day Hibiscus surprised me by suggesting I rewrite my role in his play to what I was improvising on our rehearsal breaks. I was stunned. I consulted Curtis, who said, “Do it! But ask him for a writer’s credit.” I was frightened about asking for the credit, but Jackie pushed me into asking and Hibiscus happily agreed, and this event launched me in the direction of making my own work.

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In 1985 I premiered my first full-length show at St Mark's Poetry Project, and in the packed audience of downtown artists, fellow performers and audience members, many of whom remembered my work as a teenager with the Playhouse of The Ridiculous sat, Ethyl Eichelberger. I noticed him in the audience because there was a singular gravity to the way he watched me, the way he seemed to hold on to my words. After the performance, Rita Redd, my onstage stage manager introduced me to Ethyl. "Was that all that character work improvised?" he asked me, "Yes", I replied. "Is there a script?" he asked. Somewhat embarrassed I answered "No." You are incredible, "he said quietly, and left. A few days I ran into him on 2nd Avenue outside of Gem Spa. He looked down on me from his height and said "Call Mark Russell at Performance Space 122. I told him you are a genius and that he should book you at PS 122 before someone else does."—and so began my 25 year relationship with Performance Space 122, and with it my career.

Jackie Curtis OD'ed in 1985, a month before I debuted my first full-length work at PS 122. A few months earlier, at 8BC, Curtis had crawled up on the stage and lay beside me on the floor before the curtain came up, urging the photographer he was with to take pictures of us in Hollywood Style, 1930's romantic poses. Later he threw pennies in the air as I performed, shouting, "Penny is the most precious coin in my collection" over and over. Ethyl was in my audience opening that opening night at Performance Space 122. Like the rest of Curtis's inner circle and most of the queer downtown performance scene, I was still reeling from Curtis's death. As I began to perform more regularly, Ethyl started to resent Rita Redd working with me. Eventually Rita left Ethyl's company and Ethyl blamed me. "Penny Arcade!," Ethyl shouted at the end of one of his PS 122 performances, "You should teach your employees to be better behaved." There wasn't much I could do about his feelings towards me.

In August of 1990 I was performing *Bitch! Dyke! Faghag! Whore!* at PS 122's downstairs theatre while Ethyl performed "Das Vedanya Mama" upstairs. He closed his run and I agreed to extend. I went to Ethyl's closing night. Downtown royalty style, dressed to the teeth, I sat in the second row and was the world's greatest audience, laughing at subtleties other audience members missed. At one point Ethyl quipped, "There appears to be a child in the audience." After the show Ethyl's gofer Matty asked, "Penny do you want to come back stage?" "No" I replied, "Just tell Ethyl he was great! That the show was great! That he is a master." I stopped to talk to someone in the hall. A little while later Matty came over to me. "I told Ethyl what you said. He said "So what? Who cares?" but then 5 minutes later he came over to me and asked, "Did Penny really say that?" He was very wistful."

The Sunday after Ethyl closed, as I was onstage a series of strange things happened in the theatre. I dressed for the wrong character and had to redress, a mouse ran up the leg of an audience member and they fell off the platform. "Oh," I cried in character, as the New Orleans call girl Charlene, "There is a spirit in the house! I feel someone's soul running amuck in here," and improvised for several minutes about spirits being in the room. When I came off stage an hour later I was asked to sit down and then told that Ethyl had taken his life earlier that day.

Every night before I perform I stand in the dressing room or in the wings and call on Jackie, Ethyl, Charles, and all the great actors and artists who were and remain part of my community. They never let me down.