

Joe E. Jeffreys

To Live Another Day Ethyl Eichelberger in the Twenty-First Century

Ethyl Eichelberger wrote a song he often performed as an encore to his shows. Its chorus goes, “We are women who survive and we will live to fight another day.” Ethyl Eichelberger died some 25 years ago, in the last century, yet the impact of this East Village performer and playwright swells onward, like the lines from his rousing theme song, to live another day in this new 21st century.

During his lifetime, Ethyl (née James) Eichelberger, the product of a Midwestern childhood and extensive classical theatre training, wrote and starred in some 30 solo and group performance works. Many of these works were based in the biographies of great women of history, literature, or myth, from Lola Montez to Mrs. Wiggs to Clytemnestra. As a gay man he deeply identified with these misunderstood and underestimated figures and wanted audiences to see his queer presence in these roles. From the late 70s through the advent of AIDS and its first wave of devastation in the 80s, to the peak of the National Endowment for the Arts crisis in 1990, Ethyl plied his do-it-yourself spectaculars of schmaltz and bombast all over the East Village, from the Pyramid Club to 8BC and King Tut’s Wah Wah Hut to performance spaces La MaMa, Dixon Place and P.S. 122. He also enjoyed significant success in the commercial and not-for-profit repertory theatre worlds, as a character actor on stages from Yale Repertory Theatre to Lincoln Center and Broadway.

Performance is an ephemeral art. Once the curtain rings down, what is left? In Ethyl’s case the answer is much. Some of this remarkable legacy is quantifiable while other parts are perhaps just a feeling, but you know Ethyl’s inspiration is there.

Since his death in 1990, several of Ethyl’s plays have been published and staged from coast to coast. Their literary merit, humor, outrage and audience appeal remain strong. He has also inspired characters in novels from writers including Matthew Stadler and Tom Spanbauer. As long as these works are read or performed, Ethyl is alive. While he was alive, the friends he made and the performers and writers Ethyl adopted and mentored keep him vitally alive today in their work, thoughts and conversations.

Ethyl rarely sought photo or video documentation of his performances. Yet it was captured. Anytime those glorious still images by photographers including Peter Hujar, Donna Ann McAdams and Ande Whyland among others are seen in galleries or books, Ethyl is alive. Nelson Sullivan, Character Generators and others shot video of some of Ethyl’s raucous shows. While a moving image record is no substitute for any live performance, it is possibly the closest option available for those who were not there to witness Ethyl live in the last century. The explosive growth of the Internet and YouTube in this century have shrapneled this mesmerizing moving image Ethyl content worldwide, keeping a dose of his fierceness alive at the click of a mouse. This digital century’s generation of Googlers keeps Ethyl alive.

Ethyl also lives in the works of painters and sculptors including Mark Beard, Oliver Herring and Donald Moffett, who created portraits and more abstract works inspired by him that are shown internationally. Museum and gallery shows like this one keep Ethyl alive.

Ethyl also thrives in the 21st century through the Ethyl Eichelberger Award. Established by Performance Space 122, the commissioning grant is given to an artist who embodies Ethyl’s generosity of spirit as a person and consummate skill as a multidisciplinary performer. Since 2005, the honor has been bestowed

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on an extraordinary line of artists: Taylor Mac, Julie Atlas Muz, Justin Vivian Bond, Jennifer Miller, Vaginal Davis, John Kelly, Peggy Shaw, Mike Iveson and Dane Terry. All these recipients spark Ethyl's flame onto every stage they obliterate

Ethyl's high-octane approach to life and performance also burns in the 21st century in more oblique ways. There is undeniably some pure elemental part of Ethyl beating through the aesthetics and attitudes of the current Williamsburg and Bushwick drag nexus. Lady Quesa'Dilla, Merrie Cherry and Untitled Queen likely never saw Ethyl live but keep sparks of his work alive in their role as drag shamans and fools of the new post-9/11, marriage-and-gender-equality-for-all, PrEP ciscentury.

Ethyl wrote another accordion-accompanied song he sang at the end of his *Klytemnestra*. Its lyrics go "She's alive, she's alive. Do not doubt she's alive. When you hear her name in song then she's alive. So listen to her signing and when you hear her signing don't forget she hears you too." Ethyl, can you hear us howling at you in the 21st century? We still hear and see you and know you live another day.