



Everett Quinton keeps the ridiculous relevant

By **Sophia Starmack / Banner Correspondent**

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For Everett Quinton, art is more than entertainment — it's a survival strategy.

"It's a necessary thing," says the New York-based actor and director, who has had some 40 years' experience in the theater. And, he explains, it's a rebellious act as well. "It's necessary to be political. We need to be a voice," Quinton continues. "Any government that fears art is a fraud. Any government that fears art is dangerous."

He is coming to Provincetown to appear in the Tennessee Williams Theater Festival's production of Shakespeare's "Antony and Cleopatra" at 11 a.m. this Sunday at Provincetown Town Hall. David Kaplan, the director of the play and curator of the festival, asked Quinton to play Cleopatra in drag, one of three actors from around the world who will take on the role at different times during the same performance. And Kaplan also asked him to play a male role, Domitius Enobarbus. Such an unusual assignment didn't phase Quinton, who is well versed in breaking traditions onstage.

He was born in Brooklyn, N.Y., and moved to Manhattan in 1976 to join Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, known for its elaborate, gender-bending productions, notably "Camille" and "The Mystery of Irma Vep," Ludlam's long-running whodunit farce. The company was groundbreaking in bringing aspects of drag and camp out of the bars and gay underworld and putting it on the off-Broadway stage.

"One of the hallmarks of the Ridiculous was that it elevated drag out of the sideshow," Quinton says. "It wasn't just a one-trick pony any more. Now it was art. You could interpret a role."

Quinton's attraction to drag preceded his embrace of the theater. He says he really didn't think about becoming an actor when he was young, but he always had a flair for the dramatic.

“As a little kid I would lip-sync to Gladys Knight and Doris Day,” Quinton says. “I kept my 45s in my sister’s room, and I’d swoon around in the dark. I remember once just dancing in the deli. For years I thought I was crazy. I thought I was nuts.”

While in college, he found his true direction. “I met Charles Ludlam on the street,” he recalls. “It changed my life, and opened me up. It was amazing for a little drag queen. I watched Charles get made up and I sat in the dressing room while he was transforming. Even today, as I’m playing one scene as Cleopatra, I know I will take that with me.”

Ludlam was directly responsible for Quinton’s ascendance to the stage, enlisting the young student to fill a last-minute role. “I had to finish writing a paper for school,” Quinton remembers. “I was at the theater and went up this little side room, so I wouldn’t distract everyone or be rude. Charles came up the stairs and said, ‘Everett, I just invented this little role and I need someone. Do you want to go on?’ It was the next night. I hadn’t taken any acting classes. I didn’t know how to deport myself onstage. I just said yes and went on the next night.”

The two became romantic partners and worked together at the Ridiculous Theatrical Company until Ludlam’s untimely death at 44 from AIDS in 1987 (only a few weeks after being diagnosed), which rocked the New York theater community. Quinton assumed Ludlam’s role as director and ran the company for another ten years. It was an experience that taught him that theater was a way to comment on (and deal with) tumultuous and corrupt times.

“That’s one of the things about Ridiculous for me. It’s anti-moral. It’s not immoral, but it understands that morality is a failed notion,” he says.

For Quinton, his upcoming work in “Antony and Cleopatra” fits that rationale well. The Provincetown version of the play features a unique interpretation of the classic tragedy. David Kaplan has assembled an international cast featuring performers from Turkey, Ghana and the U.S.

“It’s exciting,” Quinton says, since the players have been practicing alone or via Skype, and will have only one week of full rehearsal before appearing on the Town Hall stage. “I’m looking forward to meeting the rest of them,” he says. “I’ve been studying all summer in sort of a vacuum.”

Quinton says he loves Shakespeare, both for his poetry and for the way his themes remain relevant to modern life. “We’re only doing the first three acts of ‘Antony and Cleopatra,’” he says (the production is being called “Part I,” with the remainder to be performed at a later date), noting that the story hinges on aspects of colonialism and government struggle that feel familiar today. “Everyone else cuts all the political intrigue and cuts to the love story,” explains Quinton. “But all that wonderful stuff among the triumvirate — the vying for power, what was supposed to be the warnings to the leaders — David doesn’t cut it.”

In fact, Quinton says, he’s excited to be in the thick of the political action in the role of Domitius Enobarbus, Antony’s right hand man (and future betrayer). “I love doing Cleopatra, too, and my scene is wonderful,” he says. “But I’m more enthralled with finding Enobarbus.”

Of course, playing multiple characters of both genders was a hallmark of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. For Everett Quinton, taking the stage in “Antony and Cleopatra” may happen this Sunday, but being provocative is nothing less than his life’s work.



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