

Return of the sissy

Michael Airington resurrects Paul Lynde

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There was a time when America loved a certain kind of celebrity: flamboyant men so gay that they emitted rainbow waves who, nonetheless, pretended not to know that we knew their little secret. Not quite closeted in the traditional, hidden sense, these were what you might call Open Closet Cases. Liberace - the bejeweled maestro - is one example. But the true queen of the species was Paul Lynde.

With a role in "Bye Bye Birdie," wildly popular guest appearances as fey Uncle Arthur on "Bewitched," a short-lived sitcom (its humor premised largely on the understood implausibility of his marriage to a woman), and years as game show royalty while filling the centermost of the Hollywood Squares, Lynde entered (and camped out in) millions of American homes. But after the 80's, with the advent of outing, and the dawning cultural awareness of out gay life in the 90's, Lynde (who died in 1982) became a relic and footnote. Criticized by some for never formally coming out and scorned by others for being too stereotypically faggy, his star had seemed dimmed - until now.



Michael Airington as Paul Lynde

These days, crowds of fans are once again seeing the fey comic perform, at least as newly embodied by comedian Michael Airington in his show, "A Night With Paul Lynde." Airington may have chosen the perfect cultural moment for this resurrection. The current homogeneous gay trope in entertainment - the well-behaved, clean-cut, regular guy who's "just like everyone else" - has grown tiresome. In a time when assimilation has become the gay zeitgeist to an almost oppressive degree, many audiences are craving a little queerer queerness. The success of the Fab Five is a reminder that sissies can still rock the house - as Airington hopes to do with his new show.

In this, Airington has come full circle. When he was 14, he talked the promoters of a Nashville radio contest into letting him audition with his impressions of Jim Nabors, Katharine Hepburn and, of course, Paul Lynde. Within a few months, he would be touring as the opening act for Mel Tillis, which made him the youngest professional stand-up comedian in the country.

Now 43, he has made a career of laughter: from guest appearances on Norman Lear sitcoms to hosting the most popular morning radio show in Nashville in the 90's. In that gig, Airington created the character of Esther Goldberg, a sassy 70-something Jewish secretary, who soon became the talk of Tennessee and then Washington, D.C. (which proclaimed an Esther Goldberg Day). In fact, Esther got so big, he says, he decided to retire her before she became his only shtick. He laughs, "I didn't want to be playing gay bars in that dress in my 70's!"

Moving back to L.A. last December, he struck a deal with producers to create a one-man show about Paul Lynde. But serious creative differences arose: the producers insisted on a maudlin tale of Lynde's drinking and downfall, which Airington wisely felt would be less than entertaining. "People don't want to see him battle his demons," he says. "They want to laugh!" Soon, that deal was dead in the water.

EBay came to the rescue. Airington won a box of Paul Lynde memorabilia in an online auction, and when it arrived, he was flabbergasted to discover that it contained all the orchestrations and notes for Lynde's own variety show (which he was touring back when Airington was still a kid opening for Mel Tillis). In less than five hours, Airington brought in musical producer Mark Savage (of the excellent "Pinafore!") and booked the unwritten project into a club. Airington says, "I took the last \$5,000 I had to my name and invested it in the show."

Two months later, it's paying off in spades: the show is packing Los Angeles hotspot UltraSuede (where Lynde himself performed in its previous incarnation, Backlot); Airington has signed with a management company; and Hollywood studios have taken notice. A movie deal has been made possibly because the Paul Lynde Estate loves the show and has given Airington exclusive rights for film and merchandising.

Some of late comedian's 70's TV cohorts have also embraced "A Night with Paul Lynde." Cloris Leachman, Rose Marie, and the Gong Show's Jaye P. Morgan have all taken the show in, and iconic "Squares" host Peter Marshall has not only seen the show multiple times, he recorded voice-overs which are integral to the performance.

Plans are afoot for tour dates in others cities, which means New England audiences may have a chance to see Paul Lynde, in Airington's words, "make the world a safer place for sissies." At very least, he says, you'll laugh so hard "you'll pee yourself!"