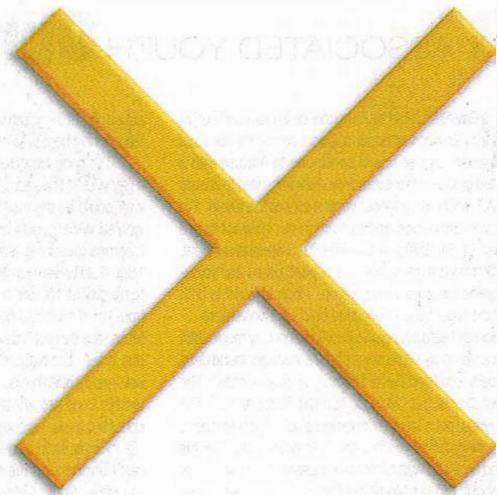
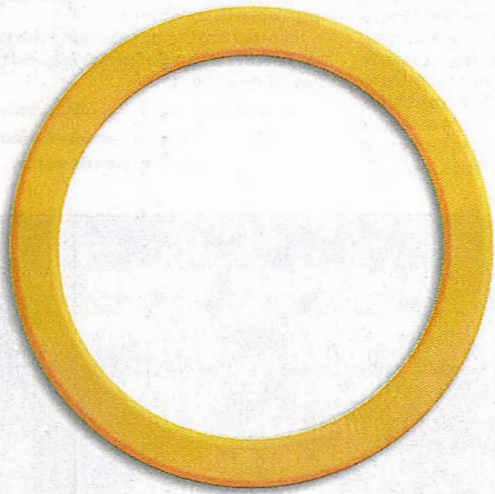


Hollywood

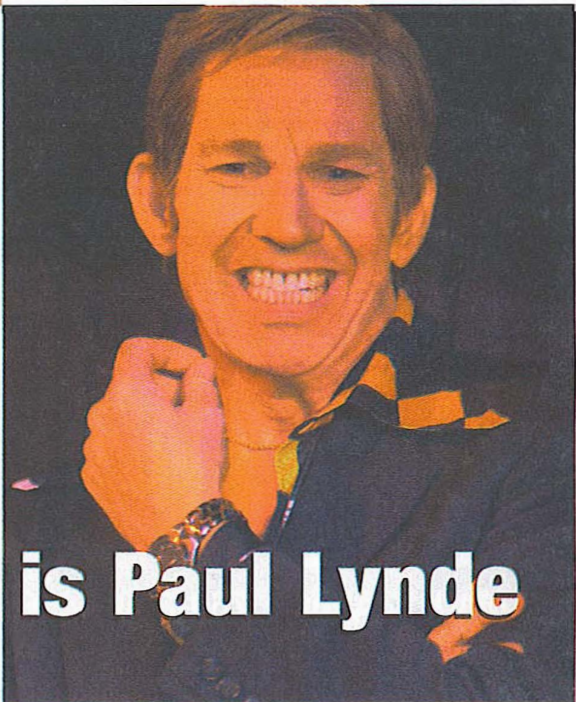


Square'd:



Michael Ayrington **is Paul Lynde**

BY MARC THOMSON



Talking to Michael Airington is like holding a conversation with a busload of in-patients at the Hollywood Home for the Incurably Nervous. He's not just one person, nor is he just one character. A small army of loonies inhabit his imagination, and fortunately for us, Airington loves nothing more than letting them all out. When he returns to Heaven this Friday thru Sunday, May 27 – 29, he'll be letting out one of the most beloved gay comics in the history of television, Paul Lynde.

Lynde began his stellar career in the original production of the '60s Broadway musical, *Bye, Bye Birdie* and his solo, "Kids" became his signature number. But most folks remember him from his television days as the snarky Uncle Arthur on *Bewitched* and

many long years as the center square in the original *Hollywood Squares*. Although the man never came out of the closet — hey, consider the era — no one made the mistake of assuming Lynde was straight. Who but a queer man could be so biting, so witty, so quick and so ceaselessly hysterical?

Airington's had a long career on his way to becoming an overnight success and, to belabor the metaphor; it's just about dawn for this undiscovered genius. We were fortunate enough to get the funny guy on the phone and listen to the origins of what promises to be a very successful move into the big time of DVD (Image Entertainment), Here TV and national tours.



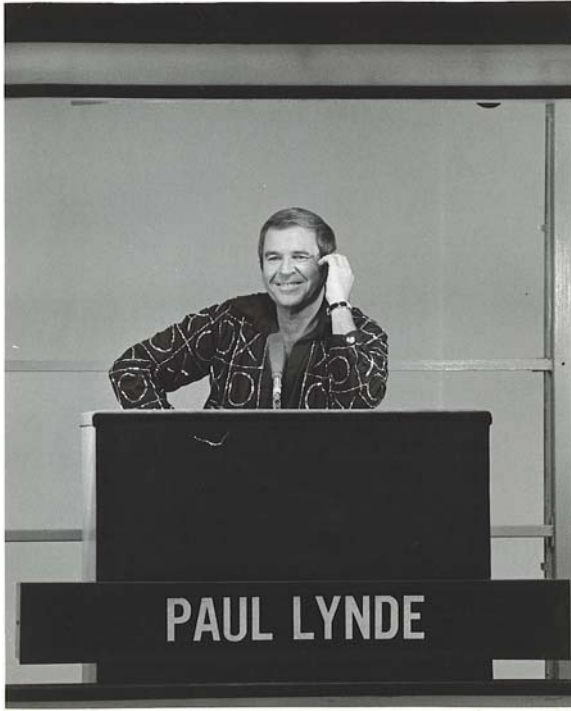
TBL: When did you begin impersonating Paul Lynde?

Airington: I got discovered by Rosemary Clooney and Mel Tillis — you couldn't find two more opposite people in show business. I was a stand up comic, and Paul Lynde was one of the people I'd do. I was child actor and did shows as a kid and Paul Lynde was always part of my life growing up. You know, in 1976 he was more popular than John Wayne — more popular than anyone in prime time. He did more than 200 hours of prime time that year.

Anyway, I did this character, a little old Jewish woman, Esther Goldberg, on my radio show in Nashville — one of many. I did her for about four years. And Paul Lynde was one of the characters who'd call in, Crazy Paul. And he'd ask a question, and I'd do a

joke. Esther Goldberg really came to life after they sold the station to Clear Channel, and I took her to Washington D.C. I thought if I could get her into politics I'd have a show. She became a hit. When you went to Washington, you saw the Esther Goldberg show. And then I thought, if I take this character nationally, I'm going to spend the rest of my life in drag! And I create lots of characters. So my friends said, "Why don't you do Paul Lynde?"

So Paul became your stand-up act?



Not at first. I talked to some producers and they thought we should come up with a two-act play, something like Truman Capote's life in Tru, and they said to come out to L.A., and so I did.

I pulled up stakes; all with my own money, I funded this project. And the script they came up with was the biggest piece of crap you ever read.

There was nothing funny in it! It was so maudlin. People will want to see Paul Lynde funny! So I'd rewrite it, make it funny, hand it back and they'd write out all the funny. I'd rewrite it again, put in the funny, and they'd write it out. This went on for months until I was basically in tears. I had put all my eggs in one basket, but I thought it just wasn't worth it. Then a friend calls up who worked at the national trust who noticed that there was

something on eBay. A man who buys and sells storage units was selling all this Paul Lynde stuff! Among some of the stuff was his original script from Bye, Bye, Birdie with all his original notes in it. And along with all this stuff was a box filled with sheet music, and he'd taken pictures of the music, and I thought, "No, no, no. It can't be." It was all the sheet music from his show "The Paul Lynde Show" that he toured nationally with in 1976.

Wow! So you bought the act off eBay?

Wait! There's more! So I started bidding on it for \$33. Because I had already invested every penny I had, I contacted the man selling the stuff and asked that even if I didn't get the auction, could I at least photocopy the stuff. And he said, of course. Then it went from \$33, to \$68, from \$68 to \$70, and all I had was \$105, and I knew that someone out there knew how much it was worth and was waiting for the last minute to trump all bids, you know? So I typed in \$5000. I waited 30 seconds before the auction ended, and said, "Okay Universe, here we go!" And I plunked it in. Someone had 30 seconds to try and match me. The punchline? I wound up getting the box for only \$112.

Kismet! So what all was inside the box?

So, I pick up the box, and it still had all the 1976 airline claim ticket on it. It had arrangements for 16-piece orchestra, everything he had for the show with Waylon Flowers and Mimi Hines and Ross Clark back then. Every year Paul Lynde did summer stock, and this sheet music alone was worth \$30 grand.

What did you do with that material?

I sat stunned for about 30 minutes before I got on the phone and called this place called the 'M Bar' in Hollywood and said, "Listen, I've got this show," and told him all about it, and he said "I love it!" and booked the act. He booked me for three weeks later. I sat down and pulled it together and called it "An Evening With Paul Lynde." In the meantime, I found his family in Phoenix, his sisters, who still run the estate. So I flew out to Phoenix and performed for them in Margarita's at the frickin' Phoenix airport. The sisters loved it so much they signed over the rights for me to do the show, do a movie, do everything! Sooo, I went back to my producers and said, "Thank you so much, but I'm going to do something that I think is Paul Lynde." And I did it at Stage One and did very, very, well, and Stuart [Kaufman, owner of Heaven nightclub] saw me and brought me down here. We ran for three months in L.A. Sold out every night from the moment it opened.

So what's the future of the show?

You know Regent entertainment and here! TV? They've made a TV special; it's going to be an HERE special and then onto DVD (IMAGE ENTERTAINMENT) and then a national tour. They brought in the director and writers and everything necessary for me to do the special.

Have many of Paul's friends seen it? Like Peter Marshall?

Peter Marshall came in for free and did all the voiceovers for free. He said, "I totally believe in what you're doing, and it's my pleasure to help you." Everyone who's been involved with this has been so wonderful. Jayne P. Morgan, Karen Valentine — Karen came in to see me, and she looks wonderful! She looks exactly the same as she did in Room 222. Jan Forbes, his lifelong friend from college, Cloris Leachman, who he also went to college with, and Rose Marie came; all the people he grew up with. And Rose Marie cried, she said, "You brought my buddy back." And Cloris Leachman said, "It was like seeing him again." Karen said the same thing, their mouths dropped. I had so much fun! It's the Vegas-style, one-man show he never did. This is 90 minutes of just Paul. People have no idea how big this thing is. The family loves it. It's a celebration of Paul. The tears come, and that's the big judgement for the success. I could have gone for the nasty Paul so many stories are about, but this is the Paul people remember. Paul doing a show.

That's such an endorsement! So tell us a little about the show.

Oh, Paul sings "I'm So Pretty" and "Kids" and talks about all the movies he never got. "I wanted all the roles! [Airington slips into Paul Lynde's voice.] I wanted to do everything!

[Cackles] I wanted Deliverance, and never got it. I auditioned for The Graduate and never got it. ‘Are you trying to seduce ME, Mrs. Robinson?’ And The Exorcist, ‘Your mother sucks cocks in hell.’ And Taxi Driver, ‘I don’t see anyone else around here, you talking to me?’”

[As himself] Paul also gives his posthumous his audition for Titanic. I pick someone from the audience to play Rose and another to hold the cue cards. And Paul’s going to play Jack. Paul was always funniest when there was total chaos, so there’s this woman who’s never acted before wearing this rubber ducky raft and Paul’s trying to direct and do his own audition at the same time. [As Paul] “Kick Rose. Kick real hard. Or the ship will SUCK you down.”

[As himself] And we do a little Bewitched and there’s the voice of Endora. Oh, Agnes Morehead and Paul HATED each other. It’s true. And then we do the Hollywood Squares. Peter Marshall’s voice comes over and says, “Hey Paul. I thought you’d like to do some of the old questions from the show.” And I do this politically incorrect bit from Hollywood Squares. The thing is, Peter keeps interrupting me throughout the show with Hollywood Squares. The three people who volunteer and help me out get lovely parting gifts.

Are your audiences die-hard Paul Lynde fans?

First the older folks came who knew his work. Then the younger crowd started coming, the ones who know the reruns of Bewitched and Bye, Bye, Birdie. I’ve had kids 21 years old come to the show and say, “We didn’t know who he was, but damn, this is funny! And some say “Oh my God, you’re the rat in Charlotte’s Web!” It’s a crossover show, too, not a strictly gay show. And there are several people who have seen the show who didn’t know that Paul had died and thought it was just him — until later in the show of course.

Through all these performances, have you made changes?

Neil Simon came to see the show with his wife, and I didn’t know he was in the audience. He sent notes via his assistant about a week later saying, “This is what you need to make the show better.” I shit my pants. Notes from Neil Simon? “Take this piece out, it will never go over with middle America. And put in an audition for Love Story.” Well, I put in Titanic. I was, like, “Thank you, Mr. Simon.” I think I ought to listen to what he has to say. And I did, now the show is bang, bang, bang and keeps going.

Have you had any negative feedback?

I’ve only had one bad review. Backstage didn’t understand that you can mix theater with cabaret. [The reviewer] didn’t like the idea that it wasn’t scripted word for word for word.

Have you been to Palm Springs before this show?

I’ve only been to Palm Springs twice in my life. Of course, Paul’s friend Jan Forbes lives here and I met her here. You know, I said no one comes in the summer. But I’ve heard that’s not so true anymore. Do you think folks will come?

Dude, you sold out your last show — duh!

[Cackles] Everyone says Paul’s looking down watching over this. Every night before I go on stage I usually say a prayer to my mom and my grandma and I say, “Paul I know you’re watching, just come on down.” I know he does.