



## ICONS QUENTIN CRISP

Writer-director **TIM FOUNTAIN** pays tribute to the icon of icons who would have turned 100 years old this Christmas Day

If Quentin Crisp had not existed, I doubt anyone would have had the nerve to invent him. With his rouged cheeks, painted toenails and vast 'bird's nest' comb-over hair, the self-styled "stately homo" of England looked like a creature from another planet. And it wasn't just Crisp's appearance, which he described as "a leaflet thrust into the hands of astonished bystanders", that marked him out from the rest of society; his views, too, often made him an outsider. Cleaning was a waste of time because "after the first four years the dust doesn't get any worse", sex was "the last refuge of the miserable" and Princess Diana was "trash who got what she deserved". The celebrated writer and raconteur described himself as a man who was merely famous for wearing make-up, and yet when he died in 1999 it was headline news on the BBC and even the *Daily Mail* devoted two pages to the subject. But who was the real Quentin Crisp, or to use *Mail* parlance, "the man behind the mascara", and what made him such an unlikely superstar?

This was the question the actor Bette Bourne and myself attempted to answer when we went to visit Crisp in New York on a freezing March day in 1999 to research *Resident Alien*, the play I was writing about him. It provided a fascinating insight. Despite being 90 years old at the time and globally famous (the TV version of his book, *The Naked Civil Servant*, starring John Hurt, played to millions of people all over the world), Crisp was still living in the tiny, filthy, one-room apartment off the Bowery that he had emigrated to in 1980. The electricity in the building was so weak that it wouldn't power the doorbell, so Bette had to call him from the box on the corner to get him to let us in. When he did so, the ancient icon greeted us at the door in his trademark fedora hat and scarf and stars-and-stripes brooch before leading us up the narrow staircase to perhaps the most famous bed-sit in the world.

Nothing, not even a lifetime of quotes about his hatred of domestic chores, could have prepared me for what I saw. The room was tiny and utterly filthy, the curtains were thick with dirt, which obscured the light, and his tiny two-ring stove was utterly coated in grime. When Crisp first moved into this apartment, someone accused him of having the dust shipped in from Fortnum and Mason; if he had, they must have stopped delivering in recent years because this dirt was real. Crisp clearly practised what he preached.

He offered us a drink and proceeded to pour me a vast brandy in a tall glass that was covered in grease; what looked like a fried egg proceeded to

form on the top of the glass. He then sat alongside me on the bed, with Bette opposite in an armchair no more than two feet away (Bourne said we looked like "three men in a boat") and proceeded to hold forth for two hours.

It was an utterly mesmerising and intoxicating performance, and made all the more fascinating for me because I hadn't seen his one-man show *An Evening With Quentin Crisp* or read his books in enough detail to know that he was often quoting from them word for word, and that this was essentially his 'greatest hits album' performed live. Neither did I know that this was a performance he gave almost daily to the hundreds of strangers who phoned him up and offered to buy him lunch (he never removed his name from the phonebook, saying: "I am the most available man in America"). He succeeded in making me believe this stuff was being said for the first time, for me.

He ranged over subjects as diverse as oral sex ("Marlene Dietrich said you have to let them put it in, otherwise they won't come back") and higher education ("a last wild effort on the part of the authorities to prevent an overdose of leisure driving the world mad"). More controversially, he asked me why President Bill Clinton was "sending the brave and the beautiful to fight in Yugoslavia" adding, "let them die, they're only Europeans". And yet in the next breath he was telling me we must give our love to the underdog and the unloveable. It was a fantastically contradictory performance.

When I returned to London to write the play, I watched the video recording of our conversation. I reached the conclusion that despite his assertion that he only said things because he meant them there was often an elaborate double and treble

*HIS VIEWS OFTEN MADE HIM AN OUTSIDER. CLEANING WAS A WASTE OF TIME BECAUSE "AFTER THE FIRST FOUR YEARS THE DUST DOESN'T GET ANY WORSE", SEX WAS "THE LAST REFUGE OF THE MISERABLE"*

bluff at play in the conversation. Did he mean it when he said he wished he'd had a sex change ("had you-know-what chopped off, become a woman and opened a knitting shop in Carlisle") or was he actually satirising the idea? Often, the more outrageous his opinions were the more he turned up a naughty twinkle in his eye that seemed to ask: "Do you believe me?"

I came to the conclusion that what Crisp hated was orthodoxy of any kind. Perhaps he had spent so long as an outsider that he instinctively rejected membership of any club that would have him as a member – and that was perhaps why I was drawn to him? I started to realise that these contradictions in his character, these different people doing battle inside his bouffanted head, were what made him so interesting. At times he appeared conservative, at others a left-wing radical. He was both an icon and iconoclast, cheerfully laying into Oscar Wilde for his "sordid life". He simultaneously struggled to belong and yet always distanced himself from getting too close to people, always addressing them as "Miss" or "Mr", even "Mr God" or "Mr Sting" – the latter who wrote the hit song *Englishman In New York* about him. In short, he was a great, glittering contradiction.

But I couldn't help feel his life had been a triumph. The sissy from the suburbs ended his life as one of the iconic figures of the late 20th century and left behind him an essence so distinct that, like Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward before him, his very name conjures up an attitude to and philosophy for dealing with the business of living. His line: "Ask yourself, if there were no praise and no blame, who would I be then?" will echo down the ages. Sadly, Crisp never saw *Resident Alien*, as he died on his way to London to have tea with Bourne during the show's first run in 1999. I regret this, because I think he'd have recognised that he could have had no finer representative on earth than Bourne. The show went on to be a big success in London and New York (where Bourne won an Off-Broadway Theatre Award for his performance) and it played just two blocks round the corner from Crisp's old flat.

So what was it that made him unique? I think in the end it was because, as his friend performance artist Penny Arcade said, "he grew up to be himself". And, warts and all, perhaps that's the greatest thing any of us can hope to achieve. *'Resident Alien' starring Bette Bourne is at the New End Theatre, Hampstead, London, from January 28 to April 5. Box Office: 0870 033 2733 or visit www.newendtheatre.co.uk*