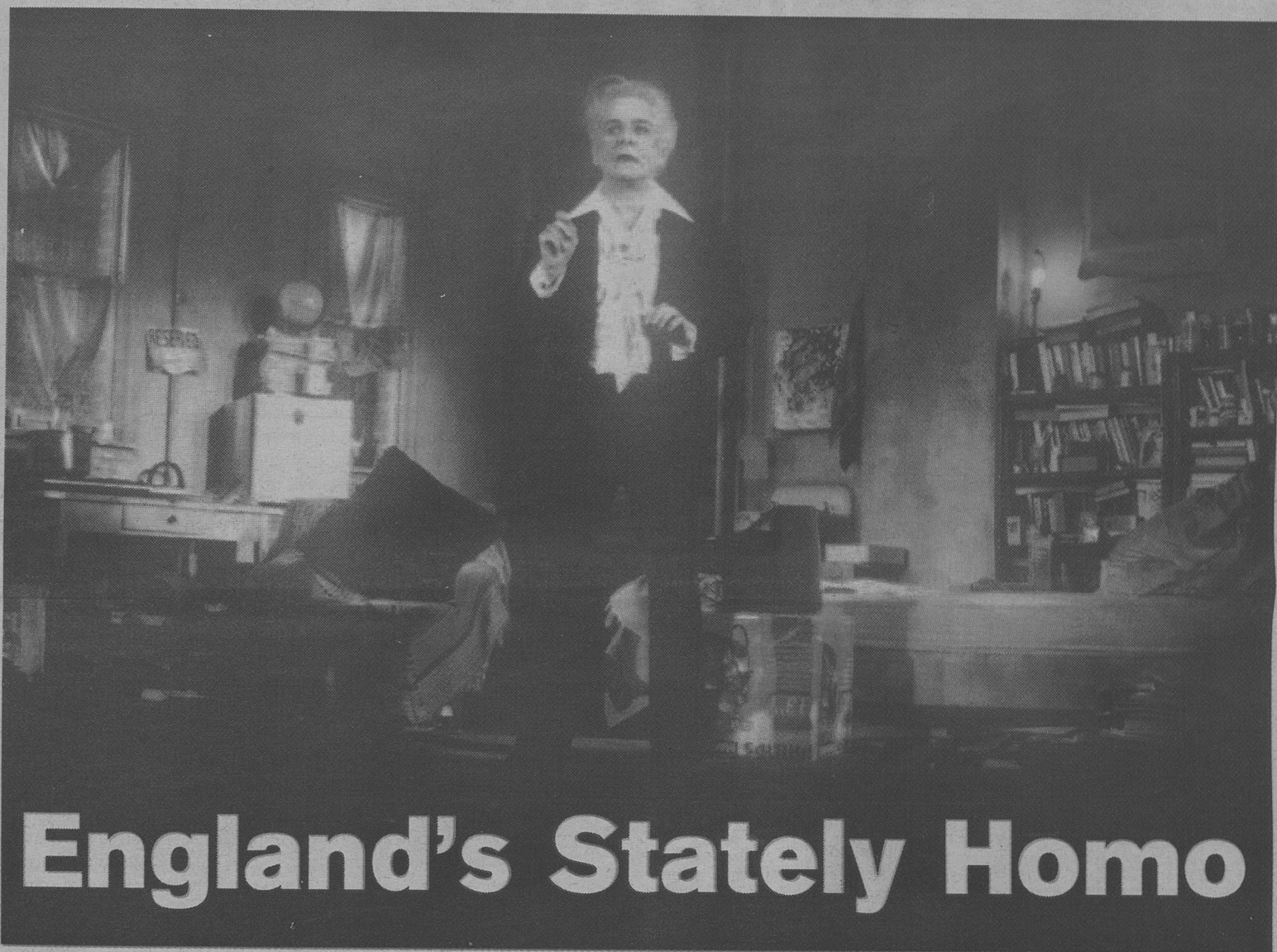


## THEATER:



# England's Stately Homo

BY LARRY RUDIGER

**Resident Alien**  
Written and directed by  
Tim Fountain  
Starring Bette Bourne  
Flynn Center for the  
Performing Arts  
September 26-28.

Don't miss any of your three chances to see *Resident Alien*, presented by the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts in its intimate basement-level theatre, FlynnSpocce in Burlington, September 26-28. This award-winning play, written and directed by Tim Fountain, stars the noted British actor and drag performer Bette Bourne as Quentin Crisp, the self-described "stately homo of England."

Crisp, by his own account, was "reluctantly born on Christmas Day, 1908," and then named Dennis Pratt. He died at age 91 in 1998, ironically enough in Manchester, England (despite his having fled to the more welcoming Manhattan years before) just as *Resident Alien* premiered. He may be unfamiliar to *OITM* readers, or only slightly known as a minor celebrity.

In his youth, the first stirrings of the modern gay-liberation movement demanded assimilation (today we'd call it "straight acting, straight appearing"). Crisp, however, developed an unflinchingly effeminate manner. He defiantly pranced through super-conventional pre-war London with lavender-dyed hair, a jaunty hat, and girly, silk shirts. His attire and manner made him a walking advertisement (he was a prostitute) and a target for bullies and toughs. Others have suggested

Crisp's persona was a sort of bridge between the 19th century dandy (think Oscar Wilde, a comparison Crisp disliked) and 20th century pansexual street theater, with a bit of W.C. Fields ("The trouble with children is that they're not returnable.") thrown in for good measure.

Crisp failed to find success as an illustrator or, at least early on, as a writer. He eventually became an art-school model, and referred to that career in the title of his breakout autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant* ("An autobiography is an obituary in serial form with the last installment missing"). It became a celebrated TV movie and solidified his late-life career as a writer and performer (you may recall him as Queen Elizabeth in the gender-bending movie, *Orlando*, based on Virginia Woolf's novel, and starring lesbian icon Tilda Swinton). He spent most of his last years living in

appalling filth (he disliked housework) on New York's Lower East Side at a time when that part of town was still dangerous and unfashionable.

His out-there appearance marked the first of several contrarian choices that would put Crisp at odds with the gay-lib crowd. He would go on to admire Margaret Thatcher; insult Princess Di (suggesting that her unhappy marriage should have been predictable to one born to be *Lady Di*); denigrate Matthew Bourne's arty, all-male *Swan Lake*; and otherwise defy conventional wisdom to remain on the political movement's fringe. But he is duly remembered for his dry wit ("Euphemisms are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne.") and unique style, qualities that make him a particularly apt subject for a single-actor play. *Resident Alien* finds Crisp in his

messy apartment ("After the first four years the dust doesn't get any worse. It's just a question of not losing your nerve."), awaiting word from "new friends" who will take him to lunch in exchange for the pleasure of his company (his phone number was published, and he considered it his duty to chat up anybody who cared to meet him).

Actor Bette Bourne, who befriended Crisp, has enjoyed acclaim in both mainstream and queer venues. The result is a play that has enjoyed considerable worldwide success. London's *Financial Times* concluded "Bourne is superb: funny, touching, unsentimental, sometimes even profound," while *Time Out* called it "A tour de force performance." Scotland's *The Herald* raved that "Bourne brings his own particular majesty to this audience with a performance signally free of camp and bitchiness but loaded with wit, irony and humanity. One cult meets another: the result is a treat all around."

Playwright and director Tim Fountain collaborated with Crisp in his final years, working from interviews and personal papers to which he had unrestricted access. In an email interview, Fountain summed up his own work: "It is not a biopic; it is not a trawl through the facts of somebody's life. It is more an evening with a Shakespearean clown who speaks the truth and was whipped for his pains. Writing the play made me love and loathe my country more: love it that it could create, and has always created, one-offs like Quentin; loathe it for its rejection of him."

Critics have noted that it's not just the treasure trove of well turned phrases and unflinching observations that distinguish *Resident Alien*. *The New York Times'* notoriously hard-to-please Ben Brantley admired the play as "genuine theater," and "most satisfying at its most physical, when words, gestures and environment ricochet off one another."

In depicting Crisp near the time of his death, when he'd already been partially paralyzed by a stroke and, despite his fame, still lived at the edge of poverty, the play shows a man who may have perfected the withering remark, but was also completely serene, comfortable in his own skin, and open to life's possibilities. ▼

Larry Rudiger is a social psychologist and theatre-goer who lives in Burlington.