

PERFORMANCE

Reenacting the Wild Art Salons of Gay Camp Icon, Paul Swan

A new play, *Paul Swan is Dead and Gone*, imagines the life of the late dancer, artist, and Andy Warhol muse once known as “The Most Beautiful Man in the World.”

Angelica Frey May 7, 2019



Tony Torn in *Paul Swan is Dead and Gone* at Torn Page (2019) (All images by Maria Baranova, courtesy of The Civilians)

“I am the most famous unknown person in New York,” says a portly, berobed Paul Swan in the introduction to Andy Warhol’s 1965 movie *Paul Swan*. Some seven decades later, the gay camp icon still hasn’t reached household name status, despite once being internationally hailed as “The Most Beautiful Man in the World” and finding success as a dancer, artist, and film star. In addition to playing himself, at age 82, in the Andy Warhol film named after him, Swan

starred in Warhol's *Camp* and Cecil B. De Mille's *The Ten Commandments*, was featured in the *Oxford Dictionary of Dance*, sculpted a bust of composer Maurice Ravel that was displayed at the Salon des Artistes Français in Paris, and was a muse to writer James Purdy.

Still, Swan's attempts to become a 20th-century American Renaissance man failed to stand the test of time. What he is most remembered for are the artistic salons he hosted in his studio atop Carnegie Hall, every Saturday from the 1930s through the '60s, attended by the likes of Marcel Duchamp and Alexander Calder. At these salons, he eventually became a piece of performance art himself, wearing ever-thicker layers of pancake makeup as he aged, embodying the concept of camp.

Paul Swan Is Dead and Gone, directed by Steve Cosson and now showing in the converted Chelsea townhouse theater Torn Page, recreates the atmosphere of Swan's weekly gatherings, in a boudoir-like space with emerald green walls hung with reproductions of his artworks. The author of this play is Claire Kiechel, Swan's great-grand niece. Though her family talked about Paul as a cautionary tale against being an artist, Kiechel saw it differently. "I held onto Paul as a talisman, a guiding queer light in dark and serious times," she writes in her playwright's note. "My relationship with Paul has shifted throughout the years — I've been repulsed by him, amazed by him, amused and embarrassed by his stark, sincere longing."



Alexis Scott, Tony Torn, and Helen Cespedes in *Paul Swan is Dead and Gone* at Torn Page (2019)

Kiechel's complicated affection for her great-grand-uncle, who died in 1972, fully emerges in this swan song of a play. La Mama fixture Tony Torn plays a grotesquely aging version of the wannabe modern Renaissance man, clad in elaborate neoclassical costumes (bejeweled crowns, togas). His foil is his

lackey/piano player/lover Bellamy (Robert M. Johanson), who responds to Swan's routine bouts of both affection and verbal abuse with wit and cynicism.

Rounding out the performance are the characters of Flora (Helen Cespedes) and Paula (Alexis Scott), Swan's two daughters. Greek-chorus style, they trace their father's ascent and cultural significance. At some point, they even cosplay, respectively, as critic Susan Sontag and the greatly under-appreciated author James Purdy, who based the protagonist of his 1972 novel *I Am Elijah Thrush* on Swan. The Sontag figure blabbers about camp (her *Notes on Camp* is from 1964), which she defines as "Tiffany lamps, La Lupe, watching porno movies when you're not turned on." To that, the Purdy figure says, "To talk about Camp is to ruin it. Everyone knows that, Susan." They are trying to determine whether Swan's performances qualify as camp, especially his shoddy onstage attempt to perform his famous dance "A Hero Slain." "Camp is only good because it's awful," Sontag continues. "I don't know if this is awful enough."



Tony Torn in *Paul Swan is Dead and Gone*
at Torn Page (2019)

Paul Swan Is Dead And Gone is one of several recent plays revolving around queer, larger-than-life historic figures, including *The Judas Kiss*, about Oscar Wilde, and *Fire and Air*, about Ballets-Russes founder Sergei Diaghilev. While more straightforward and shorter than these other two plays — partly because, with all due

respect, Paul Swan was no Sergei Diaghilev nor Oscar Wilde — *Paul Swan Is Dead And Gone* stands out for its fun satire of artists, artspeak, and cultural criticism. The characters, who all orbit around the art world, speak in a mock-cosmopolitan accent, attempting to pronounce certain words with a French inflection. As for cultural criticism, the James Purdy figure delivers a scathing remark after Sontag negatively

reviews one of his works: “You so-called critics are just a collection of broken down old newspaper alcoholics. You have no heart or mind. You are frightened to death of any writing like mine.”



Tony Torn in *Paul Swan is Dead and Gone* at Torn Page (2019)

Though its ending is a bit too neatly tied in a bow, *Paul Swan is Dead and Gone* offers 75 minutes of pure camp-fueled delight. It's poised to become the ideal off-Broadway companion to the MET's upcoming show *Camp: Notes on Fashion*.

[Paul Swan is Dead and Gone](#), written by Claire Kiechel and directed by Steve Cosson, is playing at Torn Page (435 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 19.

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC