



From left: Richard O'Brien, Nell Campbell and Angela Bruce, *The Rocky Horror Show*. Photograph courtesy of the Royal Court Theatre

SEVENTIES CINDERELLA: CLOCKING (IN AND OUT OF) THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW

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INTERVIEWED BY
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Camp performances create aesthetic economies on-and-off the stage, where performers clock into their roles, and are sometimes, without their consent, clocked out of the zeitgeist of the work. Cult-classic communities form within groups of artists, but fandoms and spectators maintain the strongest power over memory and archive-making. Characters created in camp worlds and cult-classic pieces require labor on the part of artists. Over time, we can begin to see when and where such labor is recognized, remembered, or forgotten. “Clocking out” an artist is not reserved to the iconic, nor is it only something that be experienced in contemporary performance of restaged scripts.

The elision of an artist from history is another effect of (what I call) *phantacamp*—camp performances, narratives, and modes of performance which have disseminated widely into popular culture and continue to haunt present creations of camp—through the passage of time. The current state of camp scholarship is engaged with what exactly the sensibility does, as an aesthetic that “...hovers uneasily between incompatible registers: the serious and the bathetic, the ironic and the I, the precious and the kitsch...”¹ What was once transgressive camp (subjective as that may be) becomes a haunting presence on what contemporary popular culture deems “camp” to be. Phantacamp is contingent on

1 Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Georg Vogt, and Franziska Bermann, ‘The Alliance of Camp and Dirt’, *The Dark Side of Camp Aesthetics*, 2.

time's effects on social mores and ever-changing representations of queerness and race within the sensibility. That said, phantacamp pieces may be repeated performances (i.e. scripted movies, licensable plays, or "outdated" characters or tropes) that are still beloved today, while they may not work like they did when first created.

The Rocky Horror Show is one example of a phantacamp text. This is a direct result of theatricalized camp from the 1970s British experimental, trash scene honing an aesthetic which neutralizes whiteness—from the bodies on stage to the bodies in the audience—and whiteness takes on a nonperformative quality throughout each reiteration of *Rocky Horror*. Whether it be shadow casts of the 1975 film, restaging the original musical, or in the collective memories of cult fanatics, only certain pieces and performers of the sci-fi, B-movie ephemera of *Rocky Horror* become canon. I present this interview as a point of interruption on the totalizing force that white supremacy has on the cultural history of *Rocky Horror*. Naming Angela Bruce (a Black, mixed-race actress) as a cult-classic icon—laborer, worker, artist—clocks in her history as a

performer, despite her role being principally "clocked out" of the popular culture zeitgeist.

Bruce, an English actor born in 1951, is known primarily for her television appearances. She is, too, only the second actor to take on the principal role of Magenta in *The Rocky Horror Show* after the departure of Patricia Quinn. Before starting this project, I had never heard her name spoken or written about in regard to the *Rocky Horror* cult-community. While this is not revolutionary, I do find it surprising that the first replacement of a West End original production would not be covered more thoroughly on fandom websites, outdated versions of websites, or reviewed, say, at least once for her performance of the iconic part. Bruce was born in Leeds to a West Indian father and a white British mother and put up for adoption at the age of three. Her acting career began in the early seventies after catching the theatre bug from seeing the progressive rock musical *Hair* at Newcastle Theatre Royal. "I was enthralled by how much fun the vibrant, multicultural cast appeared to be having, so I bought a ticket, made up a fictional friend to go with and went to the theatre on my own."² Bruce later joined the cast of *Hair*,

but I only know this from tragedy. The ending of the show's run at Shaftesbury Theatre in London was unpredictable, though a date quite familiar to my project. 20 July 1973, in the wee hours of the morning, the ceiling of the theatre collapses, sending ornamental plasterwork and rubble into the auditorium, destroying what would have been the musical's 2,000th performance. Under three miles away, at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, the cast and crew of *The Rocky Horror Show* prepare, in their attic space, for their final performance before transferring to the Classic Cinema. An article runs in the *Daily Express* on 21 July 1973, showing cast members of *Hair*, including Angela Bruce, dejected on the stage after the matinee show is cancelled.³

Jo Michael Rezes: After the roof collapse at the Shaftesbury and your time with *Hair*, how did you wind up in the cast of *Rocky Horror*?

Angela Bruce: It was because of the connections I had made in *Hair*—and a spectacular coincidence!—that I found myself in exactly the right place, at the right time, to land the twin roles of Magenta and the Usherette in *The Rocky Horror Show*. *Hair* was my first-ever job in the biz, and *Rocky Horror* the second.

Looking back, I'm amazed at how the stars were aligned for me at that time: the whole thing feels like a 1970s Cinderella. With no training whatsoever in drama, this cheery, upbeat, skinny, unsophisticated mixed-race kid from the sticks, with a big Afro, a cheeky smile and an ambition that was no more complicated than to make people laugh, was plucked from obscurity to join the touring and West End productions of *Hair*, and then *The Rocky Horror Show*—the two cult shows of their generation—both of them hits that broke the fourth wall and challenged traditional theatre.

A little backstory: I was nineteen when *Hair* came to the Theatre Royal, Newcastle and still living at home with my mam in the coal-mining village in County Durham where I was raised. I had been the breadwinner for the house ever since my father died when I was fifteen, working as a waitress at a nearby posh hotel, and had just started a new job as an assistant to the store's manager in a hospital kitchen that was terrifyingly dull. I dressed up to go to the show in the pink flared jeans I had bought for a pound from a friend in college and arrived to find I was the only Black person in the audience. I was mesmerised when it began, feeling the show was

² "Angela Bruce: Local Angel," BBC Wear, archived webpage, author unknown: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wear/features/2003/03/angelabruce.shtml>

³ Simons, "Performance No. 1,999 of *Hair*—and it brings the house down," *Daily Express*, 5

written specially for me, with its fantastic energy, multiracial cast, and uplifting messages of peace, interethnic harmony and sexual liberation. A Black member of the cast, Les Saxon, invited me and some other audience members to come and dance on stage at the end of the show, which they did every night, and I danced myself silly with the kind of wild, bendy, spontaneous, improvised dance I used to do on my own to Motown records at home. One of the members of the cast, Kimi Wong, asked me to audition for the show. And so, a week later, a young member of the cast named Joan Armatrading was taking me through the Motown-style audition song, which I sang for the director in my native Geordie accent instead of the American one he was expecting, making him crack up. He promptly offered me the part and, three days later, I had begun my two-year stint on the road with *Hair*, performing on stage in Aberdeen!

After touring for two years, I did a year in *Hair* at the Shaftesbury Theatre in London. It took a while before I fell in love with London – in the beginning I found it unfriendly and surprisingly racist: I just couldn't understand the unprovoked hostility I got from random strangers on the streets or the police harassment. But a new member of the cast, Belinda Sinclair, soon joined the company in

the role of Jeanie and we became best friends, which continues to this day, renting a flat together in a laid-back, bohemian area of London called Camden Town, which marked the beginning of good times in London and an exciting new era in my life. From then on, it was the two of us against the world, joined at the hip, laughing like drains, singing round the house, driving round the city, getting stoned and having a whale of a time.

After a year in the London show, I knew I needed to move on. It was not good for a young actor's career if you were in the same show for too long, so, in around June 1973, I started looking around in a slightly aimless "something will turn up" kind of way, for a new job. I was flukily offered a part in Bob Fosse's new dance musical, *Pippin*, after a surreal audition – I had gone for a laugh, to keep my dancer friend Jackie Whelan company, but I ended up turning my lack of any discernible skill as a dancer to my advantage by improvising a comical mime-based anti-dance routine that had Bob and his assistant Louise Quick in stitches, leading them to offer me a role in the chorus if I was prepared to work hard. At the same time, I auditioned for another musical – the one my friend Richard, Kimi's boyfriend, was writing while I was in *Hair*. He offered me a job as a

backing singer, while offering Belinda (a trained singer with an angelic voice) one of the lead roles.

So now I had a choice: join Richard's new musical but perhaps never get on stage or perform on stage as a member of the chorus in *Pippin*, where, as a non-dancer, I would be way out of my comfort zone. I didn't have a clue which to choose.

That's when the spectacular coincidence happened.

When Belinda and I arrived at the Shaftesbury Theatre on July 20th, 1973 for the Friday matinée of *Hair*, there was a lot more traffic than usual outside. As we headed to our dressing rooms, the stage manager asked us over the tannoy to come to the stage. It was all very weird. The auditorium was full of press photographers and journalists, and there was debris around the seats from the plaster mouldings on the ceiling, which we learned had collapsed in the early hours of the morning. Bob Swash, our lovely production manager, was the bearer of sad tidings: the building had been deemed structurally unsound, and *Hair* was closing, sadly, just a day before its 2,000th show. We sat on the stage, depressed and despondent beyond belief, as the paparazzi

photographed us, Binnie weeping and me sitting in shock. We felt our whole world was coming to an end.



"Angela Bruce just sat on the pavement in mourning. Most of the other girls were crying," writes reporter Judith Simons.⁴ The way Bruce is featured in the newspaper is changing at this point in theatre history, "[w]hile the word 'dusky' was occasionally used in press descriptions of Bruce's roles, more often than not her race or colour was omitted."⁵ *Hair*'s closing and these photographs show a striking glimpse of Bruce's act of refusal, she refuses the loss, and the places herself onto the ground while others stand in grief. She collapses just like the ceiling, quietly enough to not be written as "crying" like "most of the other girls." Losing her job is key in this moment. Losing *Hair* means that Bruce is out of work and sees herself as a "jobbing actor": "acting is a fickle business, and not one you can make a living from. There are only a handful, about 1%, of actors who are in constant work."⁶

AB: I turned to Bob, who was then in his forties and a father-figure to me,

4 Simons, "Performance No. 1,999 of *Hair*—and it brings the house down," *Daily Express*, p5.
5 Chamion Cabellero and Peter J. Aspinall, *Mixed Race Britain in The Twentieth Century*, p403.

6 "Angela Bruce: Local Angel," BBC Wear, archived webpage, author unknown.

for advice. When I told him about the *Pippin* offer, he said he'd heard rumours that it was to be a tax loss and would be off in six months. But when I mentioned the second option—to be a backing singer in Richard's new musical—he lit up. "Take it, take it, take it!" he said, "It's going to be an enormous hit!" He said it didn't matter that I'd only been offered a backing singer role because "things can change overnight in this business". He was absolutely sure I would get on stage.

So I said yes to Richard—full name Richard O'Brien—who was already the talk of the town for his sensational new musical, which—that very night, Friday 20th July 1973!—was just finishing its month-long first run at the Royal Court's tiny 63-seater Theatre Upstairs. Thanks to rave reviews and massive demand, he was about to take it to a venue four times as big in Chelsea's World's End. It was, of course, *The Rocky Horror Show*.



Bruce finds her way into the transferring company of *Rocky Horror* (many alums of *Hair* joining her), understudying all three, principle, female roles. Though, Patricia Quinn's departure from the show in

late 1973 is deemed difficult when Quinn "created an archetype without parallel in the theater."⁷ Bruce, however, fills these awkward shoes, and places electric-bolt-yellow painted wings on her eyelids, playing the role through 1974 with Tim Curry in company for a time. Patricia Quinn's Magenta is filmed for the 1975 film adaptation, all the while Bruce is continuing to portray the role on stage.

JMR: What roles did you understudy? Did you ever go on for any of these parts before taking over the role of Magenta?

AB: Having been hired as an understudy as well as a backing singer, I had to learn four parts – Magenta and the Usherette (which are always played by the same person), Columbia and Janet. As the main cast were settling in at the Classic Cinema (the second venue where the show played before it moved to an even bigger one), there wasn't time for the understudies to be rehearsed before we opened. I decided I would start learning the roles of Magenta and the Usherette—simply because they had my favourite songs—and this turned out to be a lucky choice: it meant that, when Patricia Quinn, who played these parts, lost her

voice a few days later, I was able to take her place at short notice. I got the phone call one morning to say I would be on stage that evening, and could I come in for my first rehearsal in the role with the cast in the afternoon. It was all a mad rush, and I even placed the words to the opening song, 'Science Fiction,' in my usherette's ice cream tray, in case I forgot them. I was incredibly nervous while sitting underneath the gauze on stage as the audience came in, but, as soon as I sang my first note, I was in my element. Michael White, the producer, came in to watch my performance, and offered me the part the following week when it transpired that Patricia would be not returning to the show after her illness.

I did go on as Janet one Saturday, as Belinda had cricked her neck and it was too last-minute for the new understudy, Anna Nye, to take her place. Instead, Anna played Magenta and I played Janet. That proved quite crazy, but it was hilarious fun, and the rest of the cast got me through it. Just picture it: a mixed-race woman with a face covered in freckles (kindly administered by Belinda, who came in to give me moral support), with a lightning streak in her Afro (from my role as Magenta), wearing a white-collared blue dress and ankle socks. It never occurred to me just how ridiculous I

looked until I arrived on stage and the audience cracked up.

JMR The photos taken of you and Little Nell by Joe Gaffney reveal just how iconic (and visually different) your Magenta is compared to Patricia Quinn. How much freedom did you have in making the characters your own? Did you use an accent that was different from Quinn? Were you encouraged to mimic her performance which was going to be replicated in the film adaptation?

AB: I was allowed a lot of leeway in interpreting the role, which was great. I consciously added a kind of Marilyn Monroe warmth and sexiness to my voice as the Usherette—think of 'Happy Birthday, Mister President'—to bring out all the teasing fun and playfulness. I sang 'Science Fiction' slower than Pat had, and I stretched the last note into a kind of squeal of glee at the end of a line, which always got a great response from the audience.

Dressing as Magenta every night brought out the female warrior in me: I was nearly six feet tall in those heels and I loved it! I enjoyed the fishnet stockings, suspender belt, G-string and sparkly bra, which allowed me to create a character who was raunchy, sexy and a little scary – quite unlike my real persona! The role, and the show's theme of sexual awakening, self-realisation

⁷ Dave Thompson, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show FAQ: Everything Left to Know About the Campy Cult Classic*, "Remodeling Magenta," n.p.

and exploration, allowed me to express a lot of on-stage chemistry with other characters, which was incredibly liberating for my 22-year-old self.

JMR: I'm interested in the lightning bolt makeup and the hairstyles/wigs you had as both Usherette and Magenta. Were these your choices or a designer's choices?

AB: Yasmin Pettigrew, the wardrobe mistress, and I discussed the role of the Usherette and felt we needed her to look very different from Magenta. We ran the idea of the blonde wig for the Usherette past Sue Blaine, the costume designer, who loved it. The following week I had the blonde lightning streak added to my real hair for Magenta – a kind of electrical update of Madeleine Kahn's hair in *Young Frankenstein*. My blonde wig as the Usherette proved such a great disguise that many of the audience didn't realise that Magenta and the Usherette were played by the same person – lots of people would ask me why Magenta never appeared for the curtain call at the end of the show (which I took as the Usherette as she had just sung the closing number). Even my mother didn't recognise me as the Usherette when she saw a picture of me in a magazine, saying "I know my own daughter!"

JMR: On the note of your choices: In the programme for the production,

you say that you have "done several...and will do several more" and that "Only Elvis Presley knows [your] real name." Could you speak to what these inside jokes mean? Or are they secrets that we will never quite understand?

AB: I'm afraid you'll spend a long time trying to find any meaning in these words! That was me being willfully surreal and tongue-in-cheek while trying to subvert the serious CVs that the rest of the cast (apart from Richard) had included. I had a bad case of imposter syndrome at that time as I didn't have a regular professional CV to put in the programme notes: I was intimidated by the people around me, most of whom had trained at the top drama schools, RADA or LAMDA, or were steeped in classical theatre, whereas I had only had two jobs before *Rocky Horror*, one in catering and one in *Hair!* My strategy was always to use humour when under pressure – so this is how I was at the time, constantly quipping. I made up for feeling like an interloper by laughing and cracking jokes.



Camp also constantly quips to subvert things that hurt, using "humour when under pressure," even when that constraining grasp comes from the hands hegemonic systems of oppression, like the hands of a

constantly moving clock. Time itself is slowly chipping away at Bruce's portrayal, as the iconic ticks louder and louder on the theatrical clock. Her brown skin, never written about by the press when *Rocky Horror* is concerned, remains in photographs on fanatical websites, but Bruce eludes the title of "cult favorite". Or, rather, *Rocky Horror's* transition into phantacamp script elides her from recognition. But what if more knew of this brilliant actor's legacy and namesake in relation to the history of *Rocky Horror*? Angela Bruce, a person clocked out of history by the aesthetic pull of phantacamp's potency in the restaging of a cult-classic, fades into internet ephemera with the onslaught of time. This matter of the ongoing crisis of white supremacy's influence on archive-making in theatre history, and the intersections of sexual liberation and queerness that manifest in *Rocky Horror's* cultural history.

JMR: I know it's not easy to always name racism as it occurs, but was there ever a time during your tenure in the *Rocky* cast, as a biracial actor, that left you feeling "out of place" in regard to the script, backstage life, or how audiences perceived your portrayal of Magenta? Or did the show feel welcoming to you? Is it hard to name?

AB: I never once felt out of place among the cast. There was no sense of racism within the company. But the racism was strong and quite crude outside it. There were no checks whatsoever on police behaviour towards Black people then. I was once stopped by a cop while driving my car around Hyde Park Corner roundabout in central London. I had done nothing wrong, so he had no grounds to pull me over, but when I asked him why, he said "You've got a faulty handbrake." "No, I haven't" I said, at which he yanked the handbrake up so hard that it snapped. "Now you have," he said. A week after that, I received a £10 fine in the post. We had an acronym for this phenomenon: DWB. "Driving While Black."

London was where I first really understood I was Black: of course, I had come across racism in the north-east [of England] since childhood, but that felt different – ignorant rather than actively nasty and vindictive. I went out with a guy, Bobby, for a while, a conga player from *Hair*, and we used to hang out at a well-known Caribbean restaurant called the Mangrove in Notting Hill, where the famous carnival takes place. We used to take bets on whether it would be raided by the police that day as it was raided so often. Another time, a couple of years later, I was kept in a

cell in Camberwell police station for eight hours on the basis of some cop's lurid allegation that I had been dealing drugs at the employment exchange. That's what the police did with impunity, or rather the Special Patrol Group, who were so infamous even the ordinary police hated them for their blatant abuse of due process and constant harassment of the Black community and trumped-up charges.

JMR: How does *Rocky Horror* continue to influence your life today, if at all? Were you happy or sad to leave the production? Who was your favorite person to perform with?

AB: The thing about both *Hair* and *Rocky Horror* is that they were not just shows where I "hit my marks and said my lines," as the saying goes: they came into my life when I was going through massive personal change and, in a way, they became formative parts of that development. They kicked off my own personal 1970s. *Hair* catalysed my exploration of Black politics, peace activism, sexual freedom, eastern philosophy and the ways in which the personal and the political interact, while *Rocky Horror*, as wacky, witty, uproarious and joyful as it was, appealed to my sense of over-the-top humour, my desire to explore the world and not lead a conventional life. I was on a mission to get the juice out of

everything, to try it all out. I think at that time in my life, the lyrics "Don't dream it, be it" spoke directly to my soul. We were living in the afterglow of the sixties, with its ethos of internationalism and peacemaking, bathing in the warm waters of the hippie era, chilling out in this relatively unmaterialistic time and doing all the personal, spiritual, psychological and sexual exploration we could, while also reveling in the high-camp fun of the growing glam rock subculture. I feel very lucky to have come of age at a time when, say, it was simply assumed that most people were bisexual, so it wasn't a huge deal to have lovers of both sexes; heterosexual as well as gay men could freely wear dresses and make-up and enjoy their beauty without being shamed into thinking it made them "unmanly". I had male and female lovers and didn't feel any pressure to label myself. I recently married my wonderful female partner of sixteen years, and I am incredibly glad that I had the good fortune to come of age among such an accepting, progressive, loving and broad-minded group of people as my 1970s theatre families. I think it would have been a much tougher road for me to try and explore my sexuality and come out as gay had I remained in my village in the north-east.

It took me time to become comfortable with my sexuality, but that was not so much because of internalised homophobia as that I didn't regard myself as attractive, so I was usually absolutely shocked when people told me they fancied me and couldn't understand what they were on about. I simply didn't believe what they were telling me. One woman, my dresser, told me with great trepidation on her last night that she had fallen in love with me. She was a gorgeous woman and we had spent two years bantering together, me naked every night but for a pair of yellow satin knickers as she helped get me into my dress for *Hair*. But when she said, "I love you," just as I was about to go on stage, I was totally flummoxed and responded with a hoot of laughter and a

joke, which I did whenever I was uncomfortable. She must have felt terrible, after making herself so vulnerable, and I regret to this day that I was not able to receive what she had to say in a more gracious way.

I was sad to leave *Rocky Horror*, but I needed to look for pastures new after eleven months. I loved performing with all of them. I had great onstage chemistry with Little Nell and other members of the cast. It was hugely fun, expanding and liberating for me to have these flirtatious, playful, camp scenes to interpret without inhibition, and to have a parallel life of friendship and closeness with some of the cast off-stage. It was a wonderful period of my life that, without a doubt, opened up a sense of joyful possibility about what life could be.

Interview held via email exchange from 8–22 June 2020 courtesy of Angela Bruce and her agent, Jean Diamond of Diamond Management. Sections edited for clarity and space.