

A Scot on the Rocks

WHEN WE FIRST meet Blanche Dubois, she's enveloped by a fog that we soon come to realize represents her clouded mental state and the impending revelations about the truths and falsehoods of her life. The actor Alan Cumming recounts in his achingly poignant memoir *Not My Father's Son* of being immersed in *smirr*, something in Scotland that “comes off the sea and it's not quite a rain but it's thicker than a mist,” and “it's miserable.”

Although Cumming is recounting an episode of “*smirring*” when he was a mere lad of thirteen and afraid that he'd been abandoned by his father at a show-ground in a town distant from his own, we come to realize that even now, as a fifty-year-old man, the Scottish actor remains fearful of that particular weather condition. By the book's end, however, conditions have cleared, and while emotional storms remain a possibility, Cumming knows the way to a safe home and harbor. He has learned to shelter himself from his tumultuous and even potentially lethal past.

We're accustomed to seeing the actor Alan Cumming immersed in the drama of other people's lives at the movies and on TV. He has had starring and award-winning roles as Macbeth; as Eli Gold, the campaign strategist in TV's *The Good Wife*; as the dashing, arch host of *PBS Masterpiece Mystery*; and as the Master of Ceremonies in Broadway and West End productions of *Cabaret*. But in his book, we follow the real-life role he has played up until now, one that deserves an Oscar for most original story with a lifetime achievement award thrown in.

Without giving away any of the endings, Cumming has fashioned a book about himself that involves simultaneous, overlapping plot lines in a way that only a first-rate novelist might be expected to accomplish. These threads could be formulated as a series of questions: Why was his father so unremittingly violent to his sons? How did

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**Not My Father's Son:
A Memoir**

by Alan Cumming
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his revered war-hero grandfather really die? Did his mother commit an indiscretion that could affect Cumming's very position in his family? And is there any merit to what his father is now claiming on his deathbed? Also included are the unsettling surprises that were revealed about Cumming's genealogy on a British television show.

Cumming admits early on in the book that “It has not been pleasant as an adult to realize that dealing with my father's violence was the beginning of my studies of acting.” So much for method acting. Upon meeting the father, Alex Cumming, the reader is aware right away of a presence so evil and narcissistic that the storyline assumes that of the

grimmest Grimm fairy tale, with the young Cumming and his older brother Tom in constant danger of being eaten by a wolf or crushed by an ogre. When an adult behaves with the degree of brutishness recounted here, the reader finds himself harboring the darkest of thoughts, wishing that the father would just—die.


While Cumming never expresses that wish directly, we know that his father might very well have thought that of his own son. In one incident, after having been ordered by the father to select healthy saplings from ones that won't grow, an apt metaphor if there ever was one, and realizing that he had failed at the task, the young boy Cumming “looked into my father's eyes” and for “the first time I truly believed I was going to die.” Knowing that a severe punishment was imminent, Cumming writes how he “felt like I was my father's sacrifice to the gods, a wide-eyed, bleating lamb that he was doing a favor in putting out of its misery.” It's only in the Acknowledgments page that, along with praise to his agent, editor, partner, and friends, Cumming finally thanks his father “for siring me and ensuring I will always have lots of source material. I forgive you.” It's unlikely that most readers would be so charitable toward the man from whom



we, too, have covered for many pages.

In a book that's unremittably frank and revealing, the only detail that seems out of character for Cumming, a white lie by omission, is the lack of detail about his sexuality. Not until well into the book do we learn that Cumming's "box began to burst in 1993" when he and his wife of seven years—that's certainly news to the reader—were trying to have a baby. Not so many years later, Cumming writes of his "late-night drunken walks along the banks of the Thames with a man I now realized had been the latest in a line of lovers I had engaged with because I was drawn to their anger and I wanted to fix them." Then again, what this book proves is that even a person's sexuality pales in importance relative to an abusive parent and the sorting out of that. Survival, actual and emotional, is the only prerogative. Writing about being bisexual

would have been a mere diversion in comparison. Unlike many a memoirist, Cumming has little interest in discussing sex (though there is a randy recounting of his finding pleasures with himself as a pre-pubescent). In the truth that came with learning of how he "had lost a father but found a grandfather ... there is never shame in being open and honest." By *not* discussing sex, Cumming is, in a way, adhering to that declaration, focusing on what is honestly on his mind and not what the reader wants to hear.

Every man and woman, gay or straight, growing up in Scotland or anywhere else on the planet, has probably been immersed at some point in a metaphorical *smirr*. What Cumming proves in his book is that no matter how dense or seemingly impenetrable that weather condition might be, there is a way out of it, a way to clarity and clearer skies. 

ARTIST'S PROFILE

Ryan Landry of the 'Make 'Em Laugh' School

JIM FARLEY

RYAN LANDRY has been the indisputable king (queen?) of New England fringe performance for years. A comic playwright and impresario of drag theater, his parody productions of classic movies, fairy tales, TV shows, and plays have long been a staple of Provincetown and Boston entertainment. More recently, along with his company, the Gold Dust Orphans, Landry has expanded his satiric reach to New York and beyond.

If there was a critical turning point in Landry's road to comedy, it happened in New York while he was working his way through art school as a hustler, and a john turned him on to playwright Charles Ludlam, with whom he sensed an immediate bond. After a brief stint with Ludlam's Theater of the Ridiculous, Landry moved to Provincetown, where he became a drag performer, nightclub promoter, front man for the band Space Pussy, and co-founder of his own ridiculous theater company, in 1996, known as Ryan Landry and the Gold Dust Orphans.

While he acts and often sings in most of his shows, Landry's major gift is the ability to turn out hilarious camp burlesques with a punk attitude, sort of like Charles Ludlum crossed with Courtney Love. The titles of his bawdy pop culture mash-ups—of everything from classic films to classic rock—perhaps say it best: Phantom of the Oprah,

Silent Night of the Lambs, Mary Poppers, Pornochio, Snow White and the Seven Bottoms, and on and on. And then there's Showgirls, the amateur talent show for drag queens, would-be pop stars, and misfit wannabes that Landry hosts in front of SRO crowds every Monday night during Provincetown's high season. He has also been known to share the stage with guest celebrities like Margaret Cho and Patti Lupone.

After performing in Provincetown gay clubs for years—and Boston clubs during the off-season—Ryan and the Orphans have recently garnered more mainstream success. In 2012, the prestigious Huntington Theater in Boston commissioned them to do an original play, based on the classic movie *M*, titled Ryan Landry's *M*. The following year they performed the musical parody *Mildred Fierce Off-Broadway*, which got a rave in The New York Times.

The following interview was conducted on-line in early January.



Gay & Lesbian Review: You're well-known to anyone who's ever visited Provincetown, but could you describe what you and the Gold Dust Orphans do for the uninitiated?

Ryan Landry: First a light massage and then all bets are off.

GLR: When did you first start performing and when did you realize burlesque theater was your calling?

RL: I suppose I've always been a ham. I remember finding a Super 8 film of my father putting me up on top of an old picnic table so that everyone at the party could watch me dance. I couldn't have been more than 2 years old. You would have thought I'd been asked to open for James Brown. In other words I really let 'em have it.

I never wanted anything more than to make people laugh. The sound of it still brings comfort. It's almost as if I don't feel myself without it. As if I wouldn't even know who I was or why I existed if I could no longer hear the sound. I need that sound. And that look in their eye that tells me I have pleased them. Because of these exchanges, these energies, I know precisely why I exist and who I am within this world. That, so I hear from some of my more depressed friends, is a major blessing.

As far as style goes, I don't know if you would call what I do "burlesque" theater, but I suppose it's as good a description as any other.

GLR: Who are some of the performers and artists who've had the biggest influence on your style?

RL: Charles Ludlam, Charles Busch, Charles Schultz, and Charles Manson.

GLR: You've parodied classic movies, plays, books, television shows. What is it that makes something ripe for parody?

RL: Oh, I could care less about any of that! The only thing "ripe" about my work is the smell of the jokes. In all honesty, I just run across something that I love or have loved in the past, a book, a play, a movie, and simply hold it up to the light. Of course, while doing so I pretend to be wearing my imaginary glasses—the ones with the bro-