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CALENDAR FEATURE: Life Is a Drag Zumanity ringmaster Joey Arias tells all

by Martin Stein

Before he strapped on a corset and leather pants to be the emcee for Cirque du Soleil's erotic production at New York-New York, Joey Arias spent 13 years writing a Q&A column for Paper magazine, interviewing some of the most fascinating people to pass through Manhattan. Some of those articles have been compiled into *The Art of Conversation*, recently published in this country. Arias will sign copies for adoring fans on May 13, and maybe even dish some gossip.

Are there any interviews that didn't make it into the book?

Yes.

Any that you can talk about?

Roseanne Barr. She was the last one and the reason why ... I split from Paper because she was an ass.

Surprisingly, you're not the first person to say that.

Yeah. She pretended to be nice. For whatever reason, Paper magazine would always send me a bio of what she was up to, what we were going to talk about. So, all of a sudden, the phone rang one day—and I always kept my tape recorder near the phone—and she goes, "Hi Joey, it's Roseanne Barr." "Roseanne Barr? One second, please!" and I just grabbed the thing and started talking to her, and at the end of five or seven minutes, she says, "Do you know what the hell we're talking about?" I said, "I don't know." And she said, "I was talking about my new thing bah bah bah bah whatever." And I was like, "I'm sorry, I never got a fax." And so she goes, "Well, this sucks!" And I said, "Well, this is life. Everything sucks." And she started laughing, and we kept going. And so I said, "Listen Roseanne, I don't mean to keep you on, but I'm sorry we did that little ... but we did talk about it 'cause you mentioned it and whatever," so it was fine. So she goes, "Yeah, it'll be great."

That doesn't sound so bad.

Then she called Paper and said, "What the f-k was all this about? Who the f-k is this Joey Arias? I don't want this published because this is bullshit!" And Paper was like, "Well, we're going to pay for that column but we can't publish it, and we got in a lot of trouble with her bah bah bah." And they never said anything like, "When's your next piece?" They never said anything and we separated. She was the last straw.

What was your most memorable interview?

Quentin Crisp. He was fantastic. The thing is, I don't want to call them interviews 'cause they were not interviews; they were really conversations. It really is a phone call, like we're talking now. I tell people I always like to talk to people at 11 o'clock in the morning, or noon at the latest, because people are still walking around in a daze, before they get their day going. And I don't like doing it in person; I like to do

it over the phone 'cause you can be picking your nose, you can be sitting in bed naked like I am, with a cup of coffee. It's comfortable.

Is there any parallel between the anonymity of a phone call and when you go out on stage and you're adopting a character. Because there is a certain anonymity there. You have a mask that's protective.

It's funny, I never believed it and these days, I really do believe it. I have to say, I'm a very attractive man, and when I get done, I'm done, and I'm painted, and there is a woman, a creature—I don't even want to say woman or man—it's a creature, a mysterious creature standing in front of me and I'm looking at this, going, "Wow!" So, yeah, there is something when I deal with people. I like that mask. But I'm still real inside. That mask is not a crutch. Definitely not. If push comes to shove, I could walk on that stage with no makeup and do the same show very easily.

But as far as memorable, Quentin Crisp was fantastic. Because I remember I talked to him about life, and he was so fabulous. He was like almost 100; he was like 90-something years old but I knew him for quite awhile—so I was a little younger—and he spoke so softly and so old English and the words he used people do not even use anymore in the English language. And it was so beautiful to hear him talk.

And Mishu, the smallest man in the world, was funny as hell. He's done all these sci-fi movies, and he's always in Ringling Bros., and I was in a movie with him called Big Top Pee-wee—I played the hermaphrodite in that movie, Shim, and Mishu, of course, was the little, tiny man in the movie. And we became friends. All the freaks became friends. Mishu was hysterical. I wound up calling him. They told me they had arranged a phone call; Paper said, "Oh, we arranged it." I already had Mishu's phone number, so I called him and we started talking, and I could hear he was drunk. [wheezy, squeaky voice:] "Why? Ho? Wha-wha?" "It's Joey, remember? Shim?" "Shim, yes, what you doing?" "I'm calling you." "Why?" "What do you mean, 'why'? What are you doing?" "Watching TV." "TV? What's on TV?" "I'm watching aliens fix space." "Fix a space? Have you a broken wall?" "Whaddya mean? Broken wall? It's about a hole in space. Black hole." "Black hole? What are you doing? Looking at some naked girl?" "Whaddya mean? F--k you!" and hung the phone up.

Was that the whole interview?

The whole interview. And there I was, I had a full page with this little, tiny article with a picture of a little, tiny man, and it's like the world's smallest conversation with the world's smallest man.

Was there someone who you were intimidated when speaking with?

I could talk to the president of the United States; I could talk to the queen of England. But when I had to do Dolph Lundgren, for whatever reason, I was shaking when the phone rang. I had my hands sweaty. I'd deal with photographers who'd shoot the person. When he shot him, he said, "Joey, this is one of the most beautiful men I've ever seen in my life. I'm not lying to you, but he was changing near me and I had all these mirrors, and I saw this man naked." And he goes, "This is a very large man. He has to wear three pairs of underwear to make his crotch kind of look normal." The guy's like 6-5 whatever. And then he said, "Joey, he's so intimidatating. He's so intense." And I was already in love with Dolph Lundgren anyway, so when the phone rang, it was like, [deep, husky voice:] "Hello? Is Joey Arias in?" "Yes, this is Joey Arias." Of course, I'm standing there like [what follows are some bouncing noises impossible to duplicate with the written word]. My hair's all wired out, I'm freaked out, I'm all high on coffee. "So ... uh ... how ya doing?" "Well, I'm fine." "Dolph, do you mind if I call you Dolph?" "Yes, yes, please." And in a heart's beat, we were both like, "Oh yeah, I heard about this and bah bah bah ..." But for a second, I was literally getting white hair, and I ain't gonna tell you where. Ha!