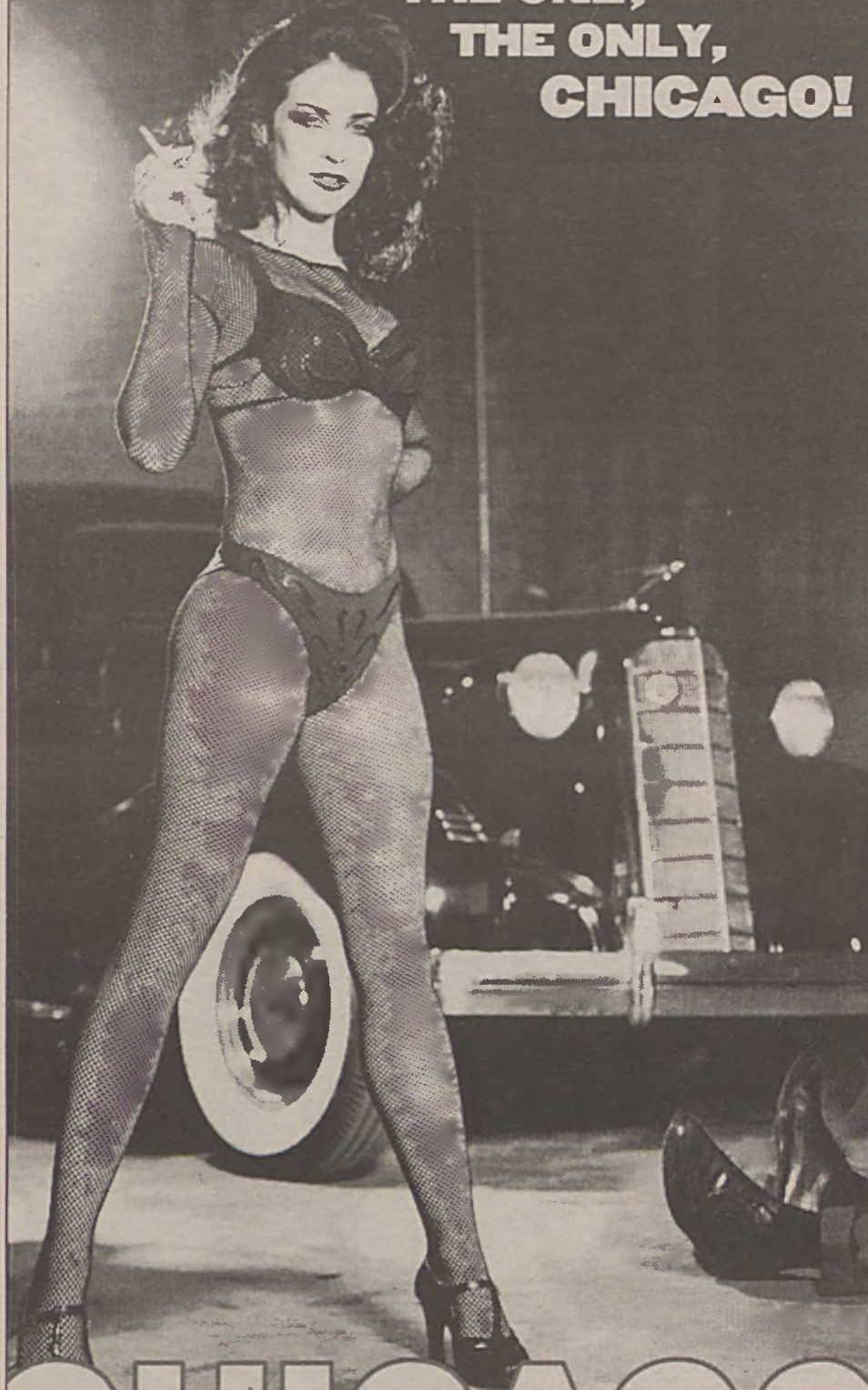


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THE BEST OF BROADWAY...CLOSE TO HOME

Charlotte's Actor's Theatre mounts *Hedwig*

*Former Off-B'way and movie hit
focuses on a performer with a
botched sex-change job*

Chances are — unless you've been under a rock for the past few years — you've heard the story of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

John Cameron Mitchell's glam-rock musical tells the story of a little-known rock singer known as Hedwig Schmidt. Born Hansel, in East Berlin, he dreams of finding his other half.

In order to get over the still-standing Berlin Wall to freedom, he reluctantly submits to a sex change operation to become Hedwig and marries an American GI. The operation is botched — leaving Hedwig with the aforementioned "angry inch."

Weeks later Hedwig watches the Berlin Wall come down — realizing that much of her effort might have been in vain. To make matters worse, she's dumped by the GI in a Kansas City trailer park.

Finding herself divorced and alone, Hedwig forms a rock band. While supporting herself with babysitting gigs, she falls for a general's son she renames Tommy Gnosis, who steals her songs and becomes the rock star Hedwig always dreamed she'd be. In a mix of anger and vowed retribution, Hedwig sets out to achieve musical fame and fortune with a punk rock band called the Angry Inch.

Charlotte's Actor's Theatre mounted the production May 28, with performances continuing through June 15. Actor Billy Ensley, an accomplished mainstay in Charlotte's vibrant theatre scene, directs the local production and plays the role of Hedwig, as well as a number of other characters.

"I've never played a character in drag," Ensley says with a chuckle. "The whole process is quite different from anything I've ever done. I guess it's very similar to the show *Cats*. I have someone who does the makeup and that takes an hour itself."

But the challenges for Ensley don't end there.

"This is a very conflicted human being, and not really a woman because the sex change was not successful," he continues. "He didn't go through any of the psychological or hormonal processes.

"He basically just had the chop and it didn't work. He is a completely androgynous figure that's conflicted about his purpose in life, his sexuality and his gender."

Ensley was sold on the idea of a Charlotte production of the play after he and his partner had an opportunity to see the show in New York.



The cast of the Actor's Theatre production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

The partner was already a confirmed Hedwig fan — he was thrilled when Ensley jumped on the bandwagon.

"I fell in love with the play," Ensley says enthusiastically. "I contacted Dan Schumacher and Chip Decker, who run Actor's Theater. We started a dialogue about the play and went to see a production of it at Trustus Theater in Columbia. We all agreed it was something cutting edge and current enough for Actor's Theater."

"When [my partner] realized I was interested in doing the show he thought it was just one of the coolest things in the world," Ensley recalls.

"After he finally saw me in costume he just started laughing. He's very supportive."

Ensley has spent most of his career in Charlotte theatre in productions of such plays as *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Pippin* and *The Harvey Milk Show*, among others.

He freely admits *Hedwig* is a departure from his previous roles.

"It's a different type of performance, and one that I never really thought I'd do," he says with a laugh. "I never wanted to see if I could pull off looking like a girl, and to be honest with you, I don't think I pull off a very good looking

see HEDWIG on 22

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