

Cleveland Confidential

Lenny and Ted's excellent adventure

by Christine McBurney

On a gray winter afternoon just over a year ago, theater director Lenny Pinna went to visit his friend, fellow Cleveland thespian Todd Burr. During their get-together, the androgynous septuagenarian actor gave Pinna a copy of the play *The Ladies of the Camellias*, asking him to read it in hopes that Pinna would envision him in one of the roles. During their conversation, Pinna says Burr uncharacteristically began to disclose information about his past that had never been told before. "After several surprising revelations, it dawned on me that there was a drama just waiting to be told," Pinna says. He interrupted Burr mid-sentence: "Stop, Tedd, stop! Don't say another word."

A few days later, Pinna coaxed Burr into talking on camera. What transpired would change both men's lives. It would be Pinna's first foray into filmmaking, and Burr's performance of a lifetime. The result: *Letters To Uranus: The Hidden Life of Tedd Burr*. "From the moment of inspiration, to the completion of the film, to its being selected for the film festival," Pinna says, "this story was meant to be told."

A longtime fixture in the Cleveland theater scene, Burr left the small town of Bellevue, Ohio, in 1943 to work in a Cleveland steel mill. He attended college at night, where he took his first acting course. In his '30s and '40s, he was a much-sought-after actor who played a wide range of roles, including Oswald in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, the lead in Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, and George in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Production photos that today adorn the walls of Dobama Theater are a testament to his talent. Burr officially "retired" from the stage in 1981, but ten years later was lured back to play Mendy in *The Lisbon Traviata*. Protesting his retirement, Burr continues to be asked to return to the stage, and sometimes he does. He recently appeared in Pinna's Cleveland productions of *Oedipus Rex* and *As You Like It*.

Burr says he has many feelings about this very personal film. He recalled working at the movie theater in his hometown after he graduated from high school. "Movies were my life and I wanted to be in the movies to escape my small town existence. Sixty years later, because of Mr. Pinna, I'm on the big screen, and I suddenly feel a fulfillment and a great feeling of peace. At this old age, everything has come together."

Shot in mini DV, *Letters* defies categorization, mainly due to Burr and his relationship to the camera, operated by Pinna. In making the film, Pinna says his goal was to encounter his subject with affection. In real time, without zooming, he frames Burr intuitively and intimately. Because of the nature of Burr's own character and because his relationship to Pinna is both personal and professional, the resulting footage flows seamlessly, blending home movie, theatrical teleplay, documentary and art-film styles. Although not necessarily a mainstream film character, the white-haired and rose-castan draped Burr has a multifaceted tale to tell that will appeal to literary, history, theater, opera and cinema buffs. His gender identity, sexual orienta-

tion, and seasoned age within a Midwest suburban context give him a perspective on life and issues that our culture is only now beginning to consider.

As Burr engages the viewer with his dramatic storytelling, an intriguing subplot emerges. As a young boy, Burr maintained a correspondence with the noted author and psychologist, Dr. Henry Bellamann, author of the novel *King's Row*. Bellamann's book tells the story of an effeminate young boy growing up in what appears to be an idyllic Midwestern setting. The 1942 film version, directed

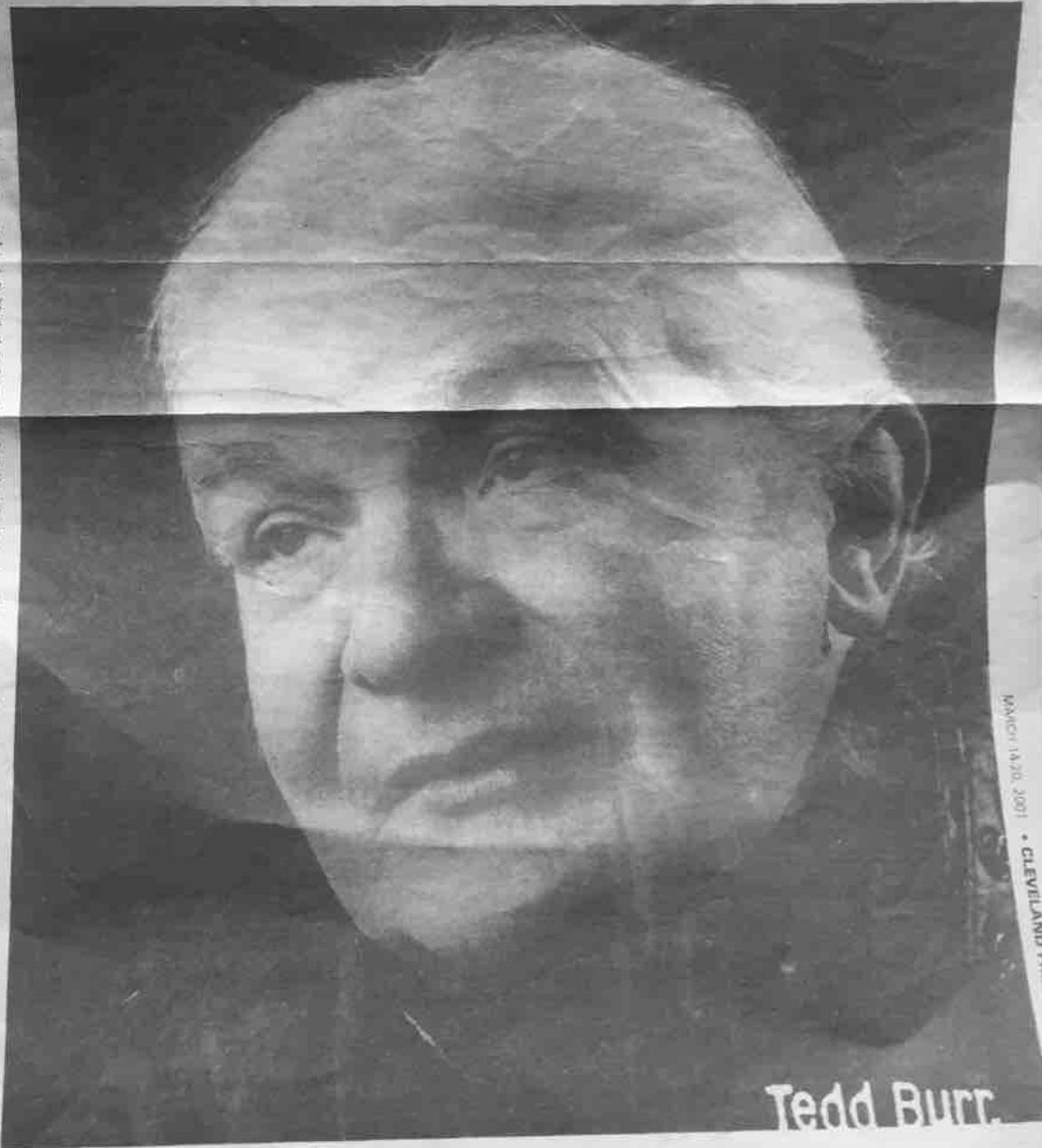
by Sam Wood, is generally highly praised, although the mores of the time (and the Hays Office) made it impossible to fully explore the novel's homoerotic themes. Although Burr and Bellamann never met during their two-year correspondence that ended when Bellamann died in 1945, Burr found solace in the writer's letters. "Bellamann," says Pinna, "almost becomes another character in the film."

Underlying Burr's performance is an ever-present critique of the psychological and sociological constructs in which he

has lived and continues to exist. Pinna says that although themes of repression, death, and tragedy permeate the material, the buoyancy of Burr's personality inspires a greater sense of hope, love, and compassion. He says Burr's mere presence is a larger-than-life performance, a combination of Norman Shearer, Quentin Crisp, and Katharine Hepburn. "Of course, it's a character who has been developing all of his life."

David Wittkowsky, executive director of the Cleveland Film Society, gave three reasons why *Letters* was selected to be in the festival: the real-time aspect, the subject, and the Cleveland connection. "Lenny recorded the entire encounter [with Burr] and that is the film. People will appreciate the interview and the film will be meaningful to a lot of Clevelanders who know both Lenny and Tedd." ■

**Letters To Uranus:
The Hidden Life of Tedd Burr**
Screens Wednesday, March 21 at 9:15 pm and Thursday, March 22 at 2 pm.



Tedd Burr.