

STAGE MANAGER

*(after a beat)*

Well, I think I am.

ADAM

*(with overwhelming yearning)*

But are you really God? I still need to know! Have you really made everything happen? You have to tell me!

STAGE MANAGER

No I don't. I don't have to tell you anything. What do you want from me? I've been doing my job, and now I'm into overtime . . .

*(She checks her watch)*

No! I'm done! That's it! I'm outta here!

*The STAGE MANAGER pulls off her headset, grabs her script, and strides off the stage and out through the audience.*

STAGE MANAGER

*(on her way out)*

You people!

*The STAGE MANAGER leaves the theater, by a rear or side exit. ADAM and STEVE watch her go, amazed. After a beat we hear from outside the theater:*

TAXI!

*ADAM and STEVE look around. Then they look at each other, mystified but elated—something has been released. Whatever happens next is up to them.*

ADAM

What's next?

STEVE

It's your call.

ADAM

*(after a beat)*

Sound one ninety-two, go.

*An instrumental, bluesy version of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" is heard; it's very romantic.*

STEVE

Merry Christmas.

*ADAM goes to STEVE, and they embrace and begin to kiss. STEVE makes ADAM aware that an audience is watching them.*

STEVE

Adam?

*ADAM sees the audience. He wants some privacy. With a mixture of sexual anticipation and great good humor, he says:*

ADAM

Curtain, go!

## Mr. Charles, Currently of Palm Beach

## Introduction

I wrote *Mr. Charles, Currently of Palm Beach* out of love and spite. It was written for the blissful Peter Bartlett, who played the title role when the play was first staged, at the Ensemble Studio Theater, in 1998. This production was perfectly directed by Christopher Ashley, and featured Ross Gibby as Shane, Mr. Charles' ward. Watching Peter and Ross rehearse and perform this play was, for me, a form of theatrical rapture.

As to the play's content, I will let Mr. Charles speak for himself. Try and stop him.

—PAUL RUDNICK

MR. CHARLES, CURRENTLY OF PALM BEACH premiered at the Ensemble Studio Theater in New York City on May 11, 1998, directed by Christopher Ashley, with the following cast:

MR. CHARLES ..... Peter Bartlett  
SHANE ..... Ross Gibby  
RECEPTIONIST ..... Kate King  
BABY ..... Cameron King

*Time: Early evening.*

*Place: A bare-bones, public-access television studio in Florida. A video camera is mounted on a tripod and aimed at a platform that supports the flamboyant, if limited set for MR. CHARLES' cable show. There is a suitably fussy folding screen, a small, ornate French writing desk, holding a silver tea service and a floral arrangement, and a gilded, throne-like French chair set center stage. There is a small table beside the chair.*

*Buoyant, big-band theme music is heard, something very upbeat and welcoming.*

MR. CHARLES enters. He is ageless. He is stylish, haughty, and bold. He wears a fairly obvious, fairly blond hairpiece, a tomato-red blazer over a linen shirt, with an Hermès scarf knotted apache-style at his throat, colorful espadrilles, white, lemon, or lime-green slacks, and a necktie knotted as a belt. His face boasts a not particularly discreet coat of moisturizer, bronzer, and a touch of mascara. His image is not transvestite, but Palm Beach decorator or antiques dealer. He is glorious.

After smiling and posing for the audience, MR. CHARLES sits on the throne-like chair. He picks up a letter from the small table.

MR. CHARLES

*(reading from the letter)*

"What causes homosexuality?"

*(He puts down the letter)*

I do. I am so deeply homosexual, that with just a glance, I can actually turn someone gay.

*(He glances at someone in the audience)*

Well, that was easy. Sometimes, for a lark, I like to stroll through maternity wards, to upset new parents. I am Mr. Charles, and I am currently residing here in Palm Beach, in semi-retirement. In exile. You see, I was asked to leave New York. There was a vote.

Today's modern homosexuals find me an embarrassment. This is because, on certain occasions, I take what I call—a nelly break. For example: a few months ago, I attended an NYU conference, on gay role models. And this young man stood up and said,

*(in an earnest, manly voice)*

"We must show the world that gay people are not just a pack of screaming queens, with eye makeup, effeminate hand gestures, and high-pitched voices." And I just said . . .

*(He does a nelly break, shrieking and flapping his wrists)*

It just happened. I went nelly.

Oh, or another time, I was attending a rally. And a woman approached me, and she said, "I would like you to donate five thousand dollars, to support our boycott of Hollywood films which portray homosexuals as socially irresponsible, promiscuous, and campy."

*(another nelly break)*

And so, I was asked to leave the city. As revenge, I have begun to broadcast this program on cable channel forty-seven, a show which I call "Too Gay." It can be found at four A.M. on alternate Thursdays, in between *Adult Interludes* and *Stretching with Sylvia*. Poor dear.

I would now like to welcome my delicious studio audience. Hello, everyone!

*(He gestures to the audience)*

And let's also introduce another popular feature of this program, my devoted companion, Shane.

SHANE, a dim, affable, low-rent young hunk enters, wearing a tight tank top, warm-up pants, and sneakers. SHANE eyes the audience and the camera. SHANE and MR. CHARLES get along just great; they appreciate each other.

SHANE

*(to the audience)*

Hey.

MR. CHARLES

Shane is my ward. I first met him three weeks ago, at a fabulous local nightspot, the Back Alley. Shane was appearing atop a plywood cube. He is a gifted performer. Shane?

SHANE nods and moves downstage so he is standing directly in front of the camera, head down. MR. CHARLES motions to a sound booth, and hot dance music blares. SHANE's head jerks up, and he begins to dance, first in his version of slow seduction, which quickly explodes into a demented frenzy. MR. CHARLES then motions for the music to stop, and SHANE stops dancing.

MR. CHARLES

Thank you, Shane.

SHANE

You got it.

SHANE exits.

MR. CHARLES

Since I have begun these broadcasts, I have received many letters and postcards, including this telegram, from the National Gay Task Force in Washington.

*(He picks up a telegram from the table)*

It reads . . .

*(reading the telegram)*

"Dear Mr. Charles. Stop."

*(He puts down the telegram)*

I would now like to answer several of the many queries I have received, regarding homosexuality. Shane?

SHANE enters, now wearing a homemade Robin costume, which includes tight green trunks, a yellow satin cape worn over a tight red tank top, and a black mask. He is not happy about this outfit. He carries a stack of letters, which he dumps on the table. Then he poses, with his hands on his hips, as a superhero.

SHANE

Man, I don't know about this outfit.

MR. CHARLES

It doesn't bother Robin.

SHANE

I ain't Robin.

MR. CHARLES

Oh, but you could be.

SHANE

I mean, what is the deal with Robin anyway?

MR. CHARLES

He's adorable.

SHANE

Yeah? Do you think that Batman and Robin, like, do it?

MR. CHARLES

Do you?

SHANE

Yeah. I bet that like, after they nail some robbers and save Gotham City, they're, like, all fired up, so they, like, do some

K and stay out all night and then they pick up like, Spiderman—he's hot—and the Incredible Hulk, and they all go back to the Batcave and jump in the, like, Bat-jacuzzi, and then Superman flies in and some of the Power Rangers, like the blue one, and the X-Men, and then they all have an orgy and then they see the Bat signal in the sky, only Batman says, fuck, I can't fight no more crime, I'm too wasted. And then they all crack up, and, like, pass out, wouldn't that be cool?

MR. CHARLES

Indeed. And we could dress up and go in their place. Only we would fight—bad taste. We would burst into people's homes and proclaim, "We have come to save you! From that terrible armoire!"

SHANE

Okay.

SHANE *exits*.

MR. CHARLES

He hides his pain.

*(He picks up a letter)*

"Dear Mr. Charles, Is there really a cure for AIDS?" Well, I've heard about these new treatments—some of my friends are swallowing fifty-eight pills, every day. It's a tribute—to Judy. I swear, only a gay disease could be treated with something called a cocktail. Why not a parfait?

*(He picks up another letter)*

"Dear Mr. Charles, Should gays be allowed to serve in the military?" Oh, no. Congress is absolutely right. You see, I have this military fantasy. Shane?

SHANE *enters, now wearing fatigue shorts, an olive-green military tank top, and a military cap. SHANE places the video camera on his shoulder and follows MR. CHARLES during the next segment, acting as MR. CHARLES' personal cameraman.*

MR. CHARLES

I'm serving in Vietnam, with my unit. And one night, I traipse into the shower tent. It's after hours, and I'm just wearing my kimono, mules, and a light moisture pack. And I hear the sound of rushing water . . .

*(SHANE discreetly makes the sound of rushing water)*

and I turn, and there at the end of a row of showers stands a naked marine—Colin Powell. His flesh glistens as he lathers up, he runs the soap over his firm chest, his already generous

belly, down, down into his manly areas. My breathing grows heavy as my kimono falls from at least one shoulder, and I stand beneath the showerhead beside Colin, attaching my plastic shower caddy, which contains my shampoo, conditioner, finishing rinse, and scented bath geleé. My eyes are everywhere, feasting on his shining, sudsy, gleaming male flesh. Finally, I speak. "Hello, soldier," I murmur. "Don't you just hate those Vietcong?" No, darlings, we have no place in the armed forces. Make remarks, not war. Thank you, Shane.

SHANE *reattaches the camera to the tripod and exits.*

MR. CHARLES

*(picking up another letter)*

"Should gays be allowed to marry?" Of course, wealthy older women.

*(another letter)*

"Can you always tell if someone is gay?" Well, I can. There's always a giveaway, sometimes it's just a glance on a street corner, or a slight moan during oral sex.

*(another letter)*

"Dear Mr. Charles, I am a lesbian."

Doesn't that sound like some marvelous first line from Dickens?

"I am a lesbian. All you do on your show is talk about gay men. What about gay women?"

*(He stands and smiles, very graciously)*

Lesbians. I could write a cookbook. But let us not resort to easy stereotypes, picturing all gay women as husky, can-do gals out hiking in their flannel and sensible shoes. A gay woman is not simply Paul Bunyan with a cat.

*(By this point MR. CHARLES has poured himself a cup of tea from the silver tea service. He notices that SHANE has neglected to provide a lemon wedge on the tray. He calls out, sharply)*

Shane?

SHANE *hurries in, holding out the lemon wedge, which he squeezes into MR. CHARLES' cup of tea.*

MR. CHARLES

Danke, Shane.

SHANE *exits*.

MR. CHARLES

Lesbians are charming, endlessly varied people, with all sorts of haircuts, from the flattop to the pixie. I, in fact, have taken



a lesbian into my home. She's asleep in the basement, until Spring.

*(another letter)*

"How can I raise gay—positive children in today's political climate?"

Well, there are many politically aware children's books, including *Daddy's Roommate* and *Heather Has Two Mommies*. I will soon be publishing my additions to this series: My children's books will include *Uncle Patrick Has a Beautiful Apartment* and *Aunt Cathy's Large Friend*.

*(another letter)*

Oh look, here's a letter for Shane.

*(He sniffs the letter, which is perfumed)*

Oh, Shane!

SHANE enters.

SHANE

Yeah?

MR. CHARLES

*(pointing to the words as he reads)*

"Dear Shane."

*(SHANE grins and grunts, very pleased)*

"I think that you are the hottest thing in south Florida. I loved you on last week's show, when you were dressed as Tarzan."

*(The Tarzan outfit was MR. CHARLES' idea, and*

*SHANE grimaces at the memory. MR. CHARLES is triumphant.)*

You see? "But why don't you dump Mr. Charles and get your own show?"

SHANE

*(pleased)*

It says that?

MR. CHARLES

Well, Shane, do you think you're ready?

SHANE

Well, you know, I've been thinkin' about it. Like, I could come out and like dance, and then . . .

*(a big thought)*

talk about stuff.

MR. CHARLES

*(encouragingly)*

That's good.

SHANE

And then I could, like, put up my beeper number and, like, do this look.

MR. CHARLES

Which look?

SHANE turns away for a second, and then turns back to the camera, delivering his version of a sultry, orgasmic look.

SHANE

And I'd go, I'm Shane, and I'm into full body massage, hot oil wrestling, and I'm an abusive top.

MR. CHARLES

*(thrilled)*

I can see it!

SHANE

Oh, and ya know what I wanna call it? My show?

MR. CHARLES

Yes?

SHANE

*(a huge thought)*

"The Shane Show."

MR. CHARLES

By all means!

SHANE

*(into the camera)*

Watch for it!

As SHANE exits, he pauses when standing right in front of the camera, and executes a demented martial arts/karate move, with a cry of "Hyah!" He exits.

MR. CHARLES

They grow up so fast.

*(another letter)*

"Dear Mr. Charles, Do you enjoy gay theater?" I am gay theater. All right, I will now give you the entire history of American gay theater, in sixty seconds. Go!

MR. CHARLES stands, and there is a dramatic lighting change, as he free-associates rapidly.

MR. CHARLES

"Jimmy isn't like the other boys—do you know what you are—he's no son of mine! I'm just so lonely and sick of my own evil—he was a boy, just a boy—Bill was my buddy, and our love was

pure and strong, but those things they're saying—they're true, about me! I'm so sick and ashamed, Karen! *Do you know what you are?* I am a thirty-two-year-old, pockmarked Jew fairy, and that was when my father saw me backstage; in my wig and my tights, and he said, take care of my son.

*(singing)*

I am what I am!

*(in a gravelly voice, as Harvey Fierstein)*

I just wanna be loved, is that so wrong? But Doctor, what's wrong with David, with all the Davids? Our people are dying, and the Mayor still won't even say the name of the disease—Maria Callas!

*(He raises his arms as graceful wings)*

Let the great work begin!

*(He raises his arms again)*

Let the great work begin, part two! When you speak of gay theater, and you will—be kind. Because it's all about love, valor, and gratuitous frontal male nudity!

SHANE enters, naked, and hands MR. CHARLES a bouquet of roses.

MR. CHARLES

Bravo!

SHANE exits.

MR. CHARLES

We have now come to my favorite part of the program, a forum which I call, "People I Hate." This week's person I hate most in the world is someone I've never even met. His name is Theodore DiBenedetto, and he wrote this letter to the editor of our local paper.

MR. CHARLES reads aloud from a copy of the newspaper, using a butch voice.

MR. CHARLES

*(reading from the paper)*

"Dear Palm Beach Sentinel, I am a gay man who owns the East Bay Hardware Store."

*(He looks up, with a withering glance, and then continues)*

"And I am sick and tired of gay people demanding equal rights when they keep behaving like freaks. As gay people, we must prove that we aren't just stereotypes. We must demonstrate that our lives are normal and wholesome. We must show that we can hold jobs, go to church, and raise children, just like anyone else. That is how we will earn our place at the table."

*(MR. CHARLES puts down the paper. He is now dangerously angry, like steel.)*

Darling, I set the table. I arranged the flowers. And I would rather have Shane's knife at my throat than share even a brunch with Mr. DiBenedetto and his kind. The nice boys. The good citizens. But please, Mr. DiBenedetto, if you'd like, by all means, be normal and wholesome and responsible. Get married, have children, move to the suburbs. I'll wait here. Oh, and Mr. DiBenedetto, by the way . . .

MR. CHARLES stands and launches a viciously savage nelly break, directly into the camera. He becomes a ferocious nelly whirlwind, making enormous, flamboyant gestures to the audience. He might look into the camera and elaborately mime applying lipstick and slicking each eyebrow. Finally, he turns, rump to the camera, and minces back to his chair, his heels off the ground, as if he were wearing imaginary spike heels. He turns, sits, and arranges his wrists. With a knife-edge flourish, he crosses his legs.

SHANE enters, wearing white jeans and an unbuttoned Versace shirt.

SHANE

Um, I gotta go out, okay?

MR. CHARLES

Do you have to get your hair cut?

SHANE

Yeah, um, right!

MR. CHARLES

Did you take the car keys?

SHANE

*(holding up the keys)*

Right here!

MR. CHARLES

*(like a doting parent)*

And all of the cash on my dresser, my credit cards, and my mother's emerald earrings from my sock drawer?

SHANE

Got 'em!

MR. CHARLES

Do you love me forever?

SHANE

Yeah, of course!

MR. CHARLES

*(delighted)*

On your way!

SHANE

Later!

SHANE *exits*.

MR. CHARLES

He's not fooling me. He doesn't need a haircut. Ah, but I am the last of my kind. I shall perish, like the dinosaur. Unless of course, Steven Spielberg discovers some ancient DNA from Paul Lynde and makes more.

*(He picks up a final letter)*

"Dear Mr. Charles, Have you ever been in love?" Oh, yes. I fell in love quite early, I must have been, oh, twelve? I had just been savagely beaten, by . . .

*(He tries to remember, quite cheerfully)*

oh, it could've been anyone. But this was at school. I came home bruised, caked with mud. I ran up to my room, and I looked in the mirror. And I thought, all right, whom would I rather be? The boys who beat me up, the boys who played baseball and caught frogs and were already losing their figures? Or would I rather be—Mr. Charles. Who even at twelve knew how to turn his face so the tears would glisten. Who knew enough to immediately put Billie Holiday on the hi-fi, and lip-synch. Who could transform a schoolyard humiliation—into an Academy Award. And that was when I fell passionately in love—with being gay. Oh, there have been men, and boys, and Wedgewood. But being gay—there's a romance.

SHANE *enters*.

SHANE

Um, Chuck?

MR. CHARLES

You're back.

SHANE

When I was drivin' to the club, I was thinkin' about, like, what you said at the beginning of the show, that you can, like, make people gay, just by lookin' at 'em?

MR. CHARLES

In my time.

SHANE

Well, I was kinda wonderin', I mean, a lotta gay guys have kicked, right? Which is like, for me, you know, bad for business. I mean, it's not like Florida's empty or nothin', but what I was thinkin' is, could you make some more? To fill the place up?

MR. CHARLES

Oh no, I don't think so, nobody wants to be truly gay anymore. It's passé.

SHANE

So, like, kick their ass! You could do it. Like, make more of you. Use your superpowers. Your gay ray. Make an army. A planet!

MR. CHARLES

It's tempting . . .

SHANE

Go for it, man!

MR. CHARLES

You're too sweet.

SHANE

Later!

SHANE *exits*.

MR. CHARLES

Well, let me see, how would I do this? Make more?

*(He looks at the audience)*

Yes—the receptionist. With the baby. Could you come up here?

*The studio RECEPTIONIST comes up onstage, carrying her 7-month-old baby. The receptionist is sweet and apologetic.*

RECEPTIONIST

I'm sorry, my babysitter cancelled, and I had to bring the baby to work.

MR. CHARLES

How lucky! What a beautiful child. Boy or girl?

RECEPTIONIST

A boy. Max.

MR. CHARLES

*(to the baby)*

How would you like to grow up—like me? How would you like to be—Mr. Max?

RECEPTIONIST

Can you really make him—like you?

MR. CHARLES

Is there a problem?

RECEPTIONIST



Well—will he have a difficult life?

MR. CHARLES

Who doesn't?

RECEPTIONIST

Will people be mean to him, just because he's gay?

MR. CHARLES

(cheerfully)

Of course.

RECEPTIONIST

Will he do those—nelly breaks?

MR. CHARLES

Sometimes—in front of your parents. Think how upset they'll be.

RECEPTIONIST

(firmly, holding out the baby)

Do it.

MR. CHARLES

If you insist.

MR. CHARLES aims two fingers at the baby and makes a small hissing noise, zapping the baby.

MR. CHARLES

There you go!

RECEPTIONIST

Thank you.

(as she exits, to the baby)

He's a very nice man.

MR. CHARLES

(to the mother and child)

Have fun! He will!

The RECEPTIONIST and baby exit.

MR. CHARLES

(to the audience)

Anyone else? Oh, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, oh please, he doesn't really have any powers. He's just another shrill, aging Palm Beach queen with too many cocktails and a bad hairpiece. Well, would you like to hear something even more horrible, my pretties? It isn't a hairpiece.

MR. CHARLES cackles gleefully and gestures grandly to his hair, mouthing the words, "It's mine." The peppy theme music from his show is heard, and he makes a little pouting face; then he begins blowing kisses and waving goodbye, as the lights fade.

The following is an alternate, abbreviated ending for this piece. It has been used on occasions when no live baby was available—using a doll or a bundle seemed impossibly wimpy. The changes for this version begin just as Shane makes his final exit.

MR. CHARLES

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It's tempting . . .

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MR. CHARLES

You're too sweet.

SHANE

Later!

SHANE exits.

MR. CHARLES

Well, let me see, how would I do this? Make more? Well, I am on television. Someone's watching. There are all those people out there, waiting for Sylvia.

(into the camera)

Hello, everyone! In your pajamas and leotards! Hello, Florida! Guess what?

(He points his fingers at the camera and makes a hissing noise, zapping the viewing audience)

Oh, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, oh please, he doesn't really have any powers. He's just another shrill, aging Palm Beach queen with too many cocktails and a bad hairpiece. Well, would you like to hear something even more horrible, my pretties? It isn't a hairpiece.

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