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FEATURE: The Savage truth of how Paul O'Grady's drag act started out at the Black Cap



Paul O'Grady and, inset, his alter ego Lily Savage

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by GERALD ISAAMAN

HE is a rogue elephant with an urgent native wit, the boy from Birkenhead who broke all the rules when he came to London to live a rough and ragged life in Camden Town and other parts.

His future seemed to be going nowhere working with dysfunctional families in dire need as a Camden Council peripatetic care officer.

Then his real talent broke through with the birth of his alter ego Lily Savage, the outrageous drag queen originally introduced at the Black Cap pub as Larry Sausage, whose urban honesty had audiences howling with delight.

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The rest, as they say, is history – remarkable social history of uncomfortable life as lived in the raw by Paul O’Grady. Now, at 57, he is hailed as the outspoken, utterly class-ridden gay rebel, who enjoys high status as TV chat-show host, cuddly comedian, brazen author and softie animal lover.

Much of his action-packed story is told in two earlier volumes of autobiography, revealing dodgy times amid dodgy people in clubs and pubs. Now comes the third volume, *The Savage Years*, which reveals what a difference success can make to someone whose big heart takes all the kicks and marches on regardless.

There are moments when you wonder – and worry – about his sanity, like the time he returned to his council task looking after Eric: “a big lad for 14, taller than me, twice as wide and blessed with a very loud voice and an extensive vocabulary of obscenities that would make a docker blush.”

It’s a world you can’t imagine as Paul reveals: “We were thrown out of a café on Tottenham Court Road and asked to leave the British Museum, and once on a tube a woman kicked me as she got up to leave, denouncing me as ‘evil’ for allowing my ‘younger brother’ to swear the way he did.

“What saddened me the most was that if people had bothered to look beyond the disorder, they would have found an intelligent and very endearing young man.”

That’s the key to Paul’s character: his ability to take on the world as the hero of the downtrodden who recognises what’s rotten, that there is an underclass that needs his charismatic ability to raise the real, potent issues.

Mind you, he is guilty of changing his opinions about people and places, the blurred photos in the book themselves evidence of distorted times. Possibly it’s all part of the contrary knockabout nature of his performances as a totally loose cannon that have so endeared him to admirers galore.

En route he has become more and more political. By the time you reach page 364 of Paul’s amazingly acrid adventures, he announces: “You won’t be surprised to hear that I’ve nothing but contempt for our current government, my suspicions growing when I learn that during the Leveson inquiry the phrase ‘I don’t remember’ and ‘I don’t recall’ were used by this prime minister we’ve found ourselves landed with 49 times in total.

“Maybe he needs to see someone about this loss of short-term memory, a complaint usually associated with long-term drug abusers. Not that I’m suggesting for one minute that Mr Cameron spliffs up in garden of Number 10, it’s just that his memory seems to be deteriorating rapidly.

“After all, he did leave the kid behind in the pub, didn’t he? A scarf, or a glove you can understand, but your daughter? Let’s hope the voters forget him just as quickly during the next election, leaving him free to tour holiday camps and care homes as a ‘memory act’ with his old pal the Dark Lord of News International, billed under the name Dandelion and Murdoch.”

Indeed, currently appearing as “Lilian Twanky” in Aladdin at the O2 Arena , he confesses: “You might think that to look at me, and see that I love doing panto, that I must love Christmas. But I can’t bloody stand it. It starts earlier each year, you’ve got Christmas songs and adverts in bloody September. It’s so expensive and commercial it makes people spend money they haven’t got. And people fret about it so much.”

Yet Paul loves his panto. “It’s a tradition that I don’t think is ever going to die out,” he declares. “People might think it’s a doddle, but it’s not, you know. I get loads of offers to do Lily, but I hadn’t done panto for a few years and thought it would be fun to play Widow Twanky, I thought it was perfect for Lily.

“And because I knew it wasn’t going to be forever, I could really enjoy it. But this is the last time, I’m finally putting the old bird to bed.”

He has said that before. More fascinating is the fact that Paul has signed up to do a TV documentary series on the working class. That truly will be an eye-opener from their uncrowned king.

● ***Still Standing – The Savage Years. By Paul O’Grady. Bantam Press, £20***

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