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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

SHOW PEOPLE

by Hilton Als

“The Fourth Wall” is the photographer Amy Arbus’s fourth book of pictures, and it is her masterpiece. Taken over the course of three years, the images are of actors acting, but they are not onstage. Arbus has posed her subjects backstage, or outside, near the theatres where



they are set to perform. The title refers to the curtain of disbelief one must draw in an effort to pretend that the action onstage is somehow natural, and Arbus’s images are about adults who believe in the transformative effect of fairy tales—and greasepaint. In these square-format black-and-white photographs, Arbus captures a moment of being someone else. In one exceptionally powerful portrait, we see the great artist Isabel Keating impersonating another great artist, Judy Garland, in “The Boy from Oz” (2004). Tiny and forlorn but still forceful, standing in the alley leading to the stage door, Keating is raising her right hand in a kind of Judy-like offering of the soul. But you can tell that Keating would never give herself up, not entirely, to a photographer, unless she could be someone other than herself. You get the picture. ♦

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