



The
Mystery
of

**IRMA
WEP**

A
Penny
Dreadful

The Mystery of IRMA VEP A Penny Dreadful

BY CHARLES LUDLAM

DIRECTED BY NELSON T. EUSEBIO III

SCENIC DESIGNER Michael Locher

COSTUME DESIGNER Sara Ryung Clement

LIGHTING DESIGNER Marie Yokoyama

SOUND DESIGNER Sharath Patel

DRAMATURG Finn Lefevre

VOICE AND DIALOGUE COACH Joanna Battles

FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER Erik Kuhn

CASTING BY Pat McCorkle, CSA
McCorkle Casting Ltd.

Katja Zarolinski, CSA
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ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Alexis Cabrera

STAGE MANAGER Emilee Buchheit*

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER Lorraine Fiore*

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT Gabby Galvan

CAST

LORD EDGAR AND OTHERS Esteban Andres Cruz*

LADY ENID AND OTHERS Tommy Everett Russell*

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The Mystery of Irma Vep–A Penny Dreadful is presented by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc., a Concord Theatricals Company.

*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.



Missouri Arts Council
The State of the Arts



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At The Rep, we know that life moves fast—okay, really fast. But we also know that some things are worth slowing down for. We believe that live theatre is one of those pit stops worth making and are excited that you are going to stop by for a show.

To help make the most of your experience, we have put together a guide that will give you everything you need to know to get at the top of your theatergoing game—fast. You'll find character descriptions, a plot summary, biographical information, historical context, and other bits and pieces.

The Teacher's Lounge

In an effort to make our educational materials accessible to students and easy for educators to incorporate into the classroom, our study guide is written in a student-oriented format. We hope that you will circulate this guide among your students in the weeks preceding your visit to The Rep, encouraging them to browse it before and after class and as time allows, using it as a launch point for both pre- and post-performance discussions. You may also want to visit our website, repstl.org, for additional information including behind-the-scenes information. Any materials, either from this guide or from our website may be reproduced for use in the classroom. As always, we appreciate your making live theatre a part of your classroom experience and welcome your feedback and questions.

How to be the best audience ever!

Take your seat

An usher will seat your class as a group, and often we have a full house with no seats to spare, so be sure to stick with your school until you have been shown your section in the theatre.

Silence is Golden

Before the performance begins, be sure to turn off your cell phone and watch alarms. If you need to talk or text during intermission, don't forget to click off before the show resumes.

Break Time

This performance includes one intermission, at which time you can visit the restrooms in the lobby.

Snack Time

There is no food or drink permitted inside the theatre, so make sure you finish your snacks in the lobby before you enter the house.

Now Hear This

Just as you can see and hear the actors, they can see and hear you. Any talking, even whispering, can be heard by those around you and those onstage, so please wait until the show is over to chat.

No Paparazzi Please

The theatre is a camera-free zone. Flash photography interrupts the action onstage and is prohibited by Actors' Equity Association rules. You can sneak a peek at production photos on The Rep's website at repstl.org.

Take a Bow

Let the actors know you respect their work by responding to the curtain call at the end of the performance. Show your appreciation for a job well done through applause.

THANKS FOR BEING A GREAT AUDIENCE!

Rep Education Department

Director of Education

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Who's Who?

Jane Twisden, the maid at Mandacrest with a few well-kept secrets, finds herself opposed to the new mistress of Mandacrest, Lady Enid.

Mandacrest's swineherd, **Nicodemus Underwood**, loves Jane in spite of her disinterest, and holds a dark secret of his own.

Lady Enid Hillcrest, the new mistress of Mandacrest and second wife of Lord Edgar, must learn to adapt to the strange happenings at the estate.

Lord Edgar Hillcrest, continues to mourn the loss of his first wife while trying to move on and be happy in his new marriage.

The memory of **Irma Vep**, Lord Edgar's first wife, looms large over Mandacrest Estate.

Alcazar guides Lord Edgar to his destiny in Egypt.

Lord Edgar discovers the **Princess Pev Amri** during his visit to Egypt and brings her home with him.

The **Intruder** intrudes, most intrusively, and causes Lady Enid much pain.

Did you Know?

In *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, all eight characters are played by only two actors! They accomplish this feat with the help of over 40 costume changes.



Enid 1



Nicodemus



Irma 1



Princess



Intruder 1

Just a few of the many, many costume renderings by Costume Designer Sara Ryung Clement

Mysterious Vocab

Situation: a job or position of employment

Vulgarian: an unrefined person, especially one with newly acquired power or wealth

Savoir-faire: French for “tact, or having knowledge of what to do in any situation”

Airs: an annoyingly condescending manner

Double entendres: words that have two meanings, one of which is typically indecent

Famished: extremely hungry

Conjecture: related to speculation or rumor, it’s an opinion that’s not based on complete information

Yesteryear: last year or the recent past

Rheumatism: a condition that causes regular pain in the joints

Virility: the quality of having strength, energy and desire

Wont: customary behavior

Supposition: an uncertain belief; an idea

Fortnight: a period of two weeks

Presentiment: a feeling about the future, often foreboding; a premonition

Guinea: a gold coin that was used as currency during the 18th and 19th centuries in Great Britain

Sepulchre: a small room built from stone in which a dead person is buried

Psychostasia: an Ancient Greek word that refers to the act of weighing a person’s soul before or after death to determine their fate

Cartouche: a drawing represented by a scroll with rolled-up ends, used as a decoration or to bear an inscription

Misanthropist: a person who dislikes humankind and avoids human society

Reprobate: an unprincipled person; a sinner

What's the Story?

WARNING: SPOILERS AHEAD

As the play begins, a great storm rages outside the doors of Mandacrest Estate. Inside, the maid, Jane Twisden, tries to keep order. The estate's swineherd, Nicodemus, enters tracking in mud, greatly upsetting the housekeeper. She implores him to be quiet, as the new mistress of the estate, Lady Enid, is asleep upstairs. Jane does not care for Lady Enid, an actress from the city. The maid worries about Lord Edgar, the master of the estate, who is still recovering from the loss of his first wife, Irma Vep. Nicodemus flirts with Jane, but she does not reciprocate. Footsteps upstairs signal the near arrival of Lady Enid, and Jane shoos Nicodemus away.

Lady Enid enters to take her tea, and the women chat. Lady Enid deduces that Jane does not like her, but the maid avoids admitting it, saying that she just doesn't know the new Mistress of Mandacrest. As she looks out the window, Jane sees Lord Edgar approaching, dragging what appears to be a wolf in from his hunt. She exists to prepare dinner, and Lady Enid is left to confront the portrait of Irma Vep hanging over the room.

Lord Edgar enters and he and Lady Enid share a passionate embrace. Lady Enid requests that the painting to be removed, as Irma Vep has been dead for three years. Edgar hesitates, as he promised to always keep a flame burning before the portrait; Enid tells him to blow it out. He does, and nothing happens. Lady Enid goes to change for dinner, and Nicodemus enters, commenting on Lord Edgar's kill. The swineherd worries about "the beast

within" Edgar, but the man says that he has it under control. He tells Nicodemus to burn the wolf and the portrait of Irma Vep. Jane enters and tells him that he can't remove Irma from Mandacrest. She spots the wolf carcass and exclaims that Lord Edgar has killed the wrong wolf.



Another evening finds Lady Enid and Jane together in the study. Enid begs Jane to share some of Edgar's family history with her, and Jane relents. A howling is heard outside, and Jane explains that it is a wolf named Victor. Lady Irma used to keep him as a pet. She shares that Edgar and Irma had a son who was viciously killed. Edgar suspected the wolf, but Irma Vep did not. She set the wolf free, and Edgar continues to hunt for it. Jane, tongue loosened by her drink, says that the evidence pointed to a werewolf murdering the child. She goes off to bed, leaving Lady Enid to read.

Soon after, a skeletal figure breaks into the room. They fight, and the intruder bites into Lady Enid's neck and sucks her blood. There is chaos and Enid screams, awakening the household. She is found nearly lifeless. Edgar, Nicodemus and Jane see the figure on the estate grounds. Nicodemus goes after it and is attacked, losing a leg. He swears that he was attacked by the ghost of Irma Vep. Lord Edgar hears the wolf again and pursues it, thinking that it's Victor. Jane follows him with a gun, but Nicodemus stops her. They struggle and shoot the painting of Irma Vep, which bleeds.



Above: Esteban Andres Cruz as Jane Twisden

Right: Tommy Everett Russell as Lady Enid

Later, Enid describes the attack to Edgar. She was reading a book about an Egyptian Princess who was preserved long ago and referred to as “She Who Sleeps but Will One Day Wake.” She goes off to rest, as she is very weak and has lost a lot of blood. Edgar and Nicodemus consider what has occurred and decide that a vampire is behind the attack. Even further, Edgar feels that the vampire must be one of the people in Mandacrest. Edgar decides to go to Egypt, as he believes there are answers there. He is also concerned that Irma will return. Nicodemus tells him to burn her love letters and she may return. When left alone, Edgar does burn her letters, and Irma Vep appears in the portrait above the mantle.

Lord Edgar travels to Egypt. His guide, Alcazar, offers to take him to an undiscovered tomb, but there is a large price to pay for the service. Edgar accepts, and they make their way through the maze of the tomb. Edgar discovers what looks like a fresh footprint and decides it was made hundreds of years ago.

They find a sarcophagus intact and are shocked to realize that it belongs to a woman; they feel that the tomb is too grand for a woman, and it does not fall in line with their previous thinking. They unwrap her hand and discover a scroll, which says “she who sleeps but will one day wake” and gives directions on how to revive her. Alcazar exits so

that Edgar can perform the ritual alone. The mummy, Princess Pev Amri, awakens and declares her hunger. Edgar runs to get Alcazar, and Pev Amri goes back into her sarcophagus. When the two men return, Pev Amri has become a mummy once more, decayed and grotesque. Alcazar and Edgar decide to leave, but Edgar insists on taking the mummy home with him.

Back at Mandacrest, Nicodemus and Jane discuss the sorry state of their mistress, who has just returned from the sanitarium. He wonders why Jane does not trust him, and she explains that there is a darkness about him. When she leaves the room, Nicodemus transforms into a wolf under the full moon and exits. Lady Enid enters and laments her situation; she is feeling distant from Lord Edgar and unsure of herself. Lord Edgar arrives and Enid flees the room. Nicodemus returns, very bloodied. Edgar reveals that the werewolf has returned and must be killed. Jane returns and discovers Nicodemus’s secret. He tells her that he is afraid he will kill Lady Enid, and Jane tells him to run away.

Lady Enid enters, dressed for dinner. She hears a voice, which leads her to open up a secret panel behind the bookcase. Someone is secretly caged behind it. The figure says that her name is Irma, Edgar’s first wife. She says that she knows where there are jewels secretly



Tommy Everett Russell and Esteban Andres Cruz

hidden, and that she'll tell Enid their location if Enid will release her. Footsteps are heard, and Enid closes the bookcase just as Edgar enters. He sees her in the dress that Irma wore the night she died and becomes enraged. They argue. Edgar reveals that he cannot let go of his first wife, that he can feel her around him. He begins to choke.

Nicodemus comes to save him, and Edgar tells him to stay with Enid for the evening. Jane enters, followed by Enid, who grabs the housekeeper and takes her keys. Jane runs off and Enid re-opens the bookcase and releases Irma Vep. Irma captures her, and in their struggle, Enid pulls off a mask to reveal that Irma is actually Jane, who is a vampire. She loves Edgar, and will kill anyone who gets between the two of them. Enid shoves Jane into the mummy case that Edgar brought back from Egypt.

Edgar returns and Enid tells him the truth, but when he opens the mummy case, Jane is not there. Enid feels herself going mad. Edgar goes to make her tea. Nicodemus briefly returns to comfort her. Enid re-opens the mummy case, and Jane is there! Enid runs from the room. Nicodemus enters, transformed into a wolf, and grabs Jane by the throat, dragging her out. Edgar returns and kills the werewolf.

As the play ends, Edgar reveals that he has written down everything that happened to him in Egypt, and he plans to shock the world by publishing it. Enid reveals that she was the mummy that Edgar found in Egypt, and that Alcazar is her father. She declares that she tricked him because she loves him. They decide to remain together, and remember all that they have lost.

Esteban Andres Cruz



Tommy Everett Russell



Theatre of the Ridiculous

The Mystery of Irma Vep is a comedic work of theatre that is typically categorized as an example of The Theatre of the Ridiculous, a style of theatre that was established in New York City in the 1960s and remained for a little over two decades.

In 1965, actor and director Ronald Tavel was the first person to use the phrase “Theatre of the Ridiculous” to describe his own work. He branded performances of his work with the manifesto of “We have passed beyond the absurd: our position is absolutely preposterous.” At the time that Tavel declared his mission statement for his particular brand of theatre, the art form was dominated by trends of realism and naturalistic acting. In the 1960s, theatre was more “slice-of-life,” and the celebrated shows were those that felt like they depicted scenes and moments and characters that lived in the real world.

The Theatre of the Ridiculous was very different in many ways. First, the acting style was much more broad and grand; today, we would probably understand it to be a style of camp acting. In addition, the props and costumes and scenic design would always be surreal, with bold colors and style choices that were shocking and disturbing. Experimental casting choices were often made as well, with cross-gender casting a common occurrence, as well as hiring non-professional actors like drag queens. These plays were often parodies that relied on the audience’s knowledge of popular culture.

The Theatre of the Ridiculous continued into the 1970s and had a strong influence on the culture of that decade. Glam rock and disco feature elements of the genre, as well as the cult-classic, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It also influenced mainstream productions like *Bat Boy* (about a half-boy/half-bat that grew up living in a cave) and *Urinetown* (a satire about a town suffering from a water shortage that requires its citizens to pay to use the bathroom).

Elements of The Theatre of the Ridiculous still exist; however, the brand has fallen out of fashion as theatre trends continue to evolve and change to fit the mood of audiences. Still, during the following decades, elements of the Theatre of Ridiculous moved into more mainstream theatre, specifically with regards to work concerning the LGBTQIA community.



John Vaccaro, sitting, directed “Heaven Grand in Amber Orbit” (1969). The rock musical starred Ruby Lynn Reyner, left, in the title role, and Francis Dudley, who played a sideshow barker. Credit Vernon L. Smith/Scope

Charles Ludlam

The two most popular companies that produced works under the brand of The Theatre of the Ridiculous were The Play-House of the Ridiculous and The Ridiculous Theatrical Company. The Play-House was founded in the mid-1960s by John Vaccaro. This ensemble produced several of Tavel's works, such as *The Life of Juanita Castro* and *The Life of Lady Godiva*. The Ridiculous Theatrical Company was founded by Charles Ludlam, the playwright who wrote *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.



Born and raised in New York City, Charles Ludlam came into the theatre early in his life. He was involved in community theatre, and he directed and performed with fellow students throughout high school. After receiving a degree in dramatic literature from Hofstra University in 1964, he joined John Vaccaro's ensemble, The Play-House of the Ridiculous. For the company, he wrote *Big Hotel*, which opened in 1967. This play featured references to over 40 different popular culture sources, including Hollywood films, textbooks, essays and even Santa Claus. This heavily referential style became a staple of Ludlam's work.

Ludlam only stayed with the company for a few years. He and Vaccaro had a falling-out over disagreements in style, and Ludlam left to form his own company: The Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Many actors from The Play-House went with him.

In comparing the works of the two companies, many critics noted that Ludlam's style felt safer. Though still Ridiculous, audiences could recognize elements of traditional comedy that made them feel more comfortable. By comparison,

Vaccaro's work was much more in-your-face, with very overt sexuality and gore. Ludlam gave the following comment about his work in a 1982 interview with *BOMB Magazine*:

"I would say that my work falls into the classical tradition of comedy. Over the years there have been certain traditional approaches to comedy. As a modern artist you have to advance the tradition. I want to work within the tradition so that I don't waste my time trying to establish new conventions. You can be very original within the established conventions."

As a writer/director/actor, Ludlam appeared in many of his own plays. He became well known for playing female roles in drag. *The Mystery of Irma Vep* became one of the first plays to address the AIDS epidemic in the United States in the 1980s, though indirectly. As a gay man, Ludlam felt that the theatre had always been a safe space for members of the LGBTQIA community, and worked to ensure that he produced theatre that was reflective of that community. Ludlam performed *The Mystery of Irma Vep* with his partner, Everett Quinton. In 1991, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* was the most produced play in the United States.

Ludlam was diagnosed with AIDS in 1987 and died soon after. His obituary appeared on the front page of *The New York Times*, and was one of the first front-page obituaries to mention AIDS as a cause of death. Ludlam was inducted into the American Theatre Hall of Fame in 2009.

OTHER WORKS BY CHARLES LUDLAM

- *Conquest of the Universe, or When Queens Collide* (1968)
- *Bluebeard* (1970), an adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*
- *Camille* (1973)
- *The Ventriloquist's Wife* (1978)
- *Elephant Woman* (1979)

Horror + Comedy = Camp?

The Mystery of Irma Vep is a delightful blend of many genres, most notably **horror** and **comedy**. True to the style of Theatre of the Ridiculous, the play parodies and heavily references many well-known works. This includes, but is not limited to, Victorian melodrama, the penny dreadful, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, the Alfred Hitchcock film *Rebecca* and *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe.

Like many plays under the brand of Theatre of the Ridiculous, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* features heavy LGBTQIA themes, and a consistently over-the-top acting style. Only two actors play the various roles, and constantly change costumes to portray the many characters of both genders. Cross-gender performance is a requirement for the piece, and lends itself to the nature of the genre.

Ludlam commented on the conceit of his play by stating: "Our slant was actually to take things very seriously, especially focusing on those things held in low esteem by society and revaluing them, giving them new meaning, new worth, by changing their context."

By taking Ludlam's lead, the play is both serious and humorous, as it is a horror-drama contextualized through the lens of the absurdly comedic. This blend of genres is a staple of something that you might know as "camp."

What is camp?

Camp is a style that seeks to make things appealing that are generally considered unappealing or in bad taste. To put it very simply, in the camp style things that are conventionally considered ugly are actually beautiful. Camp style is over-the-top, bold and even gaudy. It is an inversion of the concept of beauty. Much like *The Mystery of Irma Vep* inverts the idea of horror-drama into a comedic one, camp seeks to work against expectations to create a new kind of art.

Camp is often loud, lively and audacious. It thrives in that which overwhelms. Due to this reputation, camp has always been tied to drag (the art of cross-gender dressing in a performative way), and by extension, the LGBTQIA community.

When you enter The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis to see *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, you will immediately notice the inclusion of the camp style in our production. Director Nelson T. Eusebio III and scenic designer Michael Locher were heavily inspired by the "drag ball culture" of the 1920s. At these events where attendees dance, vogue and perform to win trophies and prizes, the decor and costumes were vibrant, bright and audacious. More information about "drag ball culture" can be found in the 1991 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*. The 2018 FX television series *Pose* also celebrates the ball culture of New York City in the 1980s.

Many TV shows and films are known for their camp style, including *The Addams Family* (1964), *Hairspray* (1988), *Burlesque* (2010), *Corpse Bride* (2005), *Young Frankenstein* (1974) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Performers such as Cher and Lady Gaga are tied to the camp style. The 2019 Met Gala was themed "Camp: Notes on Fashion."

The many looks of Lady Gaga at the 2019 Met Gala.



Reading Between the Lines

The Supernaturally Infected

Charles Ludlam has included many supernatural elements in his work, borrowing heavily from the fantasy and horror dramas to include creatures such as mummies, werewolves and vampires. Each of these “monsters” undergo a transformation to take their supernatural form, the most obvious one being the werewolf. Another similarity between them is the idea that they are all infected. The mummy is infected by death, rotting her away to nothing. The vampire is infected by this need for blood that cannot be quenched. The werewolf is infected by a bite that takes away his body and his mind, leaving behind a shell of the man beneath. Writing as a gay man in the 1980s, Ludlam wrote this play as a response to the AIDS crisis that took many of his friends and members of the LGBTQIA community. **As you watch the play, look for moments where the very real, very serious crisis becomes a part of the very absurd, very comical world of *The Mystery of Irma Vep*. Discuss the connection between the real and the ridiculous, and how Ludlam conveys his reality through the ridiculous.**

Hidden Identity

Another strong motif throughout the play is the idea of hidden identity. Many, if not all, the characters in *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, have a secret that they keep until the right dramatic moment of revelation. Some characters play tricks, others transform, but no character is entirely truthful. This idea may be further supported by the main conceit of the show: only two actors are a part of the cast, and they play all the roles, constantly switching costumes and wigs and genders and voices as they move through the play. This manic energy that carries through the piece also keeps the characters from exposing themselves before the time is right. **As you watch the play, try to track the many character changes. Do you see any connections to characters being played by the same actor? When all secrets are revealed, do these connections increase? Discuss the “hidden identity” aspect of these secrets, and what that theme means to you as you watch this play.**

Grief and Mourning

Arguably, the main conflict in *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is Lord Edgar’s inability to fully move past the sudden death of his first wife, Irma Vep. It drives a wedge between him and Lady Enid, causes conflict between Lady Enid and the house staff, and even drives Edgar to Egypt. Most of the action is motivated by the fact that after three years, Edgar cannot tear himself away from Irma. Other characters mourn as well, though not necessarily over death. Nicodemus mourns over his situation, Jane mourns over what she cannot have. Enid mourns over the fact that she cannot keep Edgar’s attention. In a way, all of the characters are in mourning. Knowing that Charles Ludlam wrote this play as a way to deal with the insurmountable loss that he was feeling helps to explain why all of the characters find themselves in this state of holding on to the past and what they cannot have. **As you watch the play, note the arc of each character as they express their grievances and face their losses. Where do the characters end up? How might this allude to Ludlam’s opinion on grief and death?**