

Study Guide

for

THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP

A PENNY DREADFUL



by

Charles Ludlam

ABOUT THE PLAY

An Egyptologist named Lord Edgar Hillcrest, has brought home his new bride, Lady Enid, to Mandercrest Manor, but his dead first wife still haunts him, overshadowing any postnuptial bliss. From the dyspeptic housekeeper, Jane Twisden, Lady Enid learns of the tragic death of the first wife and hears about the curse of the wolf, somehow unnaturally associated with Lord Edgar's manservant Nicodemus. The plot wings its way from the old manor house to an ancient Egyptian tomb and back to the manor.

DISCUSSIONS and ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

- ★ After seeing the play, create a synopsis of the plot without divulging the "mystery".
- ★ Does being knowledgeable about the literary references make any difference to the audience's reaction to or enjoyment of the play? How would it change the perspective of the audience?
- ★ Describe any two characters who were played by the same actor. How did the actor sustain continuity of that character from one scene to another?

Many things borrowed:

Irma is threaded with pieces parody, vaudeville, farce, melodrama and satire reinvented from the cultural genres that Charles Ludlam clearly adored. The plot sources for this cultural burglary include the *Rebecca*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *The Mummy's Curse*. The dialogue is peppered with literary allusions (i.e. "*Irma hath murdered sleep*") and amusingly knowing references to the on-stage sex switches (i.e. "*Well, any man who dresses up as a woman can't be all bad*"). There are references to classic texts from Ibsen to Shakespeare to Poe. *The Mystery of Irma Vep* has humor for everyone, from quick sight gags to burlesque, double entendres, political commentary and everything in between.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: CHARLES LUDLAM

He was compared to Moliere, Shakespeare and Aristophanes; he was championed by cultural greats including Andy Warhol, Rudolf Nureyev, and Leonard Bernstein. Charles Ludlam was an "underground" artist whose aesthetic was about tearing down the cultural elite and mainstream society in general. He was wickedly talented at it, and they loved him for it. When he died of complications from AIDS in 1987, his obituary appeared on the front page of the New York Times, over a thousand people attended his memorial service.

THE BEGINNINGS

THE BEGINNINGS

Born in Floral Park, New York, in 1943, Charles Ludlam's path was forever altered, he claims, by his accidental discovery of a "Punch and Judy" show at the Mineola Fair.



- Punch and Judy puppets.



Traditional Punch & Judy show.

From that point on, Ludlam was writer, director and performer of basement puppet shows and plays. In high school, where he was already sporting long hair before it was fashionable, he founded his own theatre troupe, staging Japanese Noh plays and avant-garde dramas. At Hofstra University, the faculty's refusal to appreciate his acting, which was deemed "too pasty, corny, mannered, campy," only furthered his "outsider" identity and tendency to defy the theatrical mainstream. In the years following, the forces that would shape his artistic life came into focus.

IN NEW YORK CITY

He was in the right place at the right time. It was the '60s, and Warhol had laid down the template for bohemianism. In fact, a group of actors and avant-garde artists with loose Warhol associations began the Play-House of the Ridiculous, and Ludlam joined them early on. With them he had his first drag performance opportunity and made a hit with his portrayal of Norma Desmond, the fading star of Sunset Boulevard. He quickly became a diva among the players, both in talent and in temperament.

THE RIDICULOUS THEATRICAL COMPANY

He broke off from the playhouse and founded the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in 1967. This was an ever-shifting troupe of bohemian players dedicated to anarchic, flamboyant productions, in which

high art and pop culture were thrown together in plays rife with literary references, drag roles, scatological humor and philosophical musings. The plays were performed downtown, usually in the middle of the night, initially with minuscule budgets. Ludlam secured his reputation as a versatile, imaginative and iconoclastic performer.

Throughout the '70s, the Ridiculous Theatrical Company produced 29 Ludlam works, most of which he directed and starred in, including his adaptations of *Hamlet (Stage Blood)* and Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.



Charles Ludlam in *Irma Vep*

DISCUSSIONS and ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

★ Discuss TV shows, radio comedies, and movies where the humor may possibly be considered “ridiculous”. Compare such work as Monty Python, Carol Burnett, and Trailer Park Boys. What is the appeal/or not, of that style of humor?

★ Explore the following terms which are used to describe comedy.

- farce
- satire
- burlesque
- verbal humour
- slapstick
- tragicomedy

★ Describe, with examples, some of the types of humour found in *Irma Vep*.

THE SUCCESS OF IRMA VEP

The Mystery of Irma Vep, his 25th play, gave Ludlam financial security and international acclaim. He wrote the two-person show for himself and his partner Everett Quinton, whom he met at the age of 32 and was to stay with until the end of his life. In *Irma Vep*, Ludlam managed to parody at least a dozen literary and cinematic paragons, including Joyce, Wilde, Poe, and Ibsen (the play steals its opening lines directly from *Ghosts*), classic horror movies, *Gaslight*, *Wuthering Heights*, Gothic novels and the movie *Rebecca*. *Irma Vep* was named one of 1984's best plays by Time Magazine and The New York Times and won Drama Desk and Obie awards for Ludlam and Quinton. Though many doubted the play would survive outside of its Ridiculous home, it has become one of the most produced plays in America. In 1986, at the height of his activity, with his 30th play, *Houdini*, in preparation, Ludlam was diagnosed with AIDS. The following year, a month after winning an Obie award (his fourth) for sustained achievement in the theatre, Ludlam died at the age of 44; until hours before his death his private room was the centre of a quiet but continuous party. (*This material was drawn from Berkeley Rep and Hartford Stage program notes.*)

DISCUSSIONS and ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

- ★ Discuss the reasons why a play named one of the best plays of 1984, is still so popular twenty years later.
- ★ Discuss how knowing about the author, might affect your understanding or enjoyment of the play.

LUDLAM ON IRMA VEP

"It's a surrealist-mystery-melodrama-adventure story, influenced by Max Ernst's collage novels. (http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/ernst_max.html- Max Ernst) This time I started with the device and worked back to the play. "Usually I start with a sketch or at least an outline, but this time it was just the idea that two people are doing all the parts and they have to do quick changes. Quick change is a brand of magic, and a lot of what happens is based on misdirection. The changes are possible, but they don't seem possible. "When I'm walking offstage at a leisurely pace, I burst into an incredible run the minute I'm out of sight. Everything goes at a much faster tempo backstage. It deceives you, because you see the person exit slowly and you're still hearing the voice. "It's up to the actor to create the illusion that you're coming from a place where something other than quick-change occurred. It takes tremendous concentration to avoid coming on looking like you've just been through a car wash!"

DISCUSSIONS and ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

- ★ Discuss the physical challenges for the two actors. What type of training would an actor require to prepare for this role?
- ★ Discuss the vocal work heard in the play. How did the actors use different voices, accents, inflections etc. to create a consistent voice for each character?
- ★ Discuss the costume changes. How would the, seemingly-impossible, costume changes, actually happen? See Charles Ludlum's comment about this.
- ★ Comment on the types of sound-tracks/music used to enhance the moods and action.
- ★ How were the complexities of the set changes covered, so that the audience remained involved with the production?

FROM 'RIDICULOUS' MANIFESTO INSTRUCTION FOR USE

"This is farce not Sunday school. Illustrate hedonistic calculus. Test out a dangerous idea, a theme that threatens to destroy one's whole value system. Treat the material in a madly farcical manner without losing the seriousness of the theme. Show how paradoxes arrest the mind. Scare yourself a bit along the way."

KUSHNER ON LUDLAM

"One little look, one sideways glance from Ludlam onstage and an audience would scream , in terror? Certainly in joy! "Those eyes were forever warning us. He sees how ridiculous the world is, and look out! He sees through you, he's learned your secret, he knows what you hope no one has noticed, that you too are ridiculous; and though now, at this instant, we are sharing a laugh at some other idiot and his absurdities, at any instant, the idiot we are watching and laughing at could easily be you!"
Tony Kushner, A Fan's Forward, in *The Mystery of Irma Vep* and other plays.

PENNY DREADFULS - *Irma Vep* is described as a Penny Dreadful. Dime Novels flourished from the middle to the close of the 19th century in America and England where the novels were known as "**penny dreadfuls**." The dime novels were aimed at youthful, working-class audiences and distributed in massive editions at newsstands and dry goods stores. The plots, which were often inspired by the melodramas of the day, tended to be predictable and extremely diffuse. Highwaymen and notorious criminals were popular characters, and many fictionalized accounts of Dick Turpin, Jack Rann, Jack Sheppard, and Sweeney Todd, the demon barber of Fleet Street were featured. But far from glamorizing villains and criminal behavior these new story papers condemned vice and promoted

virtue. **H.G. Wells, Winston Churchill and Noel Coward** were amongst their boyhood audience and in later years praised them highly. Victorian society used escapist fiction as a scapegoat to blame for juvenile crime while ignoring the deeper ills like poverty and prostitution. In fact records show that at the height of the story paper boom, juvenile crime fell.

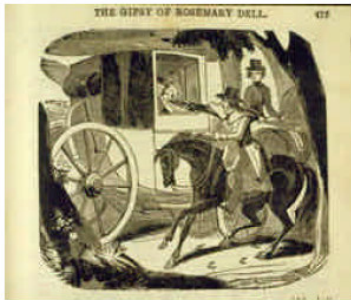
DISCUSSIONS and ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

- ★ Some of these types of comments about increased violence are being leveled at today's video-games. Discuss.
- ★ What would the popular reading material be for today's youth?

Irma Vep Page 8

A large number of these works were produced by a few major firms - Edward Lloyd, G. Purkess, John Dicks, Edwin Brett or the Hogarth House - but many small publishers and obscure printers were also involved.

It was a **competitive market**, and there were various selling devices used to attract purchasers, such as free coloured plates, prize draw tickets, toy theatre sheets, even scraps of tinsel for decorating character portraits, and posters.



From *Ela the outcast; or The gipsy of Rosemary Dell* 1841

To clarify the term, and its predecessor the **Penny Blood**, we have to go back to the first quarter of the 19th century.

A large number of these works were produced by a few major firms – Edward Lloyd, G. Purkess, John Dicks, Edwin Brett or the Hogarth House - but many small publishers and obscure printers were also involved. It was a **competitive market**, and there were various selling devices used to The popular form of literature in England then was **the Gothic novel**. The setting and plot to this type of fiction generally included castles, dungeons, hideous, hags, plus a hero, heroine and villain. The problem was that these books cost much more than any average worker could afford and, apart from this, only a small percentage of the working classes could read. **A combination of events changed this situation.**

- 👉 Reforms in the government's education policy led to most children being taught to read.
- 👉 The introduction of a new type of steam-powered printing press meant publications could be turned out at an unprecedented rate.
- 👉 The stamp tax on newspapers was abolished and a new type of paper made from esparto grass cost only a fraction of the existing price.
- 👉 There was an incredible growth of efficient rail and canal shipping. These factors led to cheaper literature being made available to a growing market of poor and working class people. For readers caught in a squalid and deprived existence, it was an escape into the exciting world of literature.

DISCUSSIONS and ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

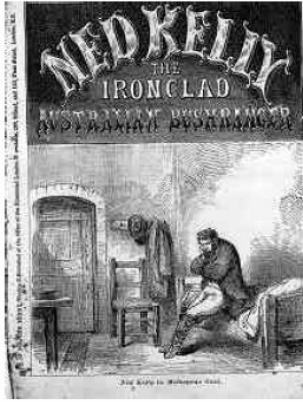
- ★ Discuss the promotions and selling devices used in today's market.
- ★ Discuss the reasons for the rise in popularity of TV "Reality" shows.

ESCAPING INTO LITERATURE

The first periodicals to gain popular appeal (apart from newspapers and journals) were serial publications such as **The Newgate Calendar** and **The Terrific Register**.

(1825).

The former chronicled the lives of famous criminals both present day and historical while the latter offered sensational reports of murders, tortures, ghostly sightings, bizarre customs etc.



Charles Dickens 'took in' The Terrific Register every week and recalls being delightfully "...frightened out of my wits by it!"

The first publisher to successfully gauge the public's growing fascination with sensational reading material was Edward Lloyd. His first serial publication

(apparently) was 'Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Footpads etc' (1836) in 60 numbers. Its success was instant and he quickly put out "History of the Pirates of all Nations" (1836) in 71 numbers. Lloyd was an unscrupulous businessman and had no qualms about cashing in on the dramatic success that Charles Dickens was enjoying at the time. He set his writers to produce plagiarisms of Dickens's works, issuing them with slightly altered titles e.g. Oliver Twiss, Nickelas Nicklebery, The Penny Pickwick etc. Lloyd is credited with coining the term **penny blood** as his sensational publications invariably contained gory scenes. In all Lloyd put out over 200 serials from the mid-1830s to the mid-1850s. The money they earned him helped establish a newspaper empire, which continued well into this century. In his later years Lloyd was ashamed of his early publications and employed agents to go around old bookshops buying up this material and destroying it. Luckily one agent stored up a large amount and later sold them for a handsome profit.

DISCUSSIONS and ASSIGNMENTS FOR THE CLASSROOM

★ Discuss the issues involved in the play.

For example:

-the 'afterlife'

-insanity

-belief in the 'supernatural'

★ Discuss the quiet, meaningful ending of the play.

★ *Irma Vep* has eight roles, all played by two actors. What would be the effect of having different actors for each of the eight roles?

★ What relation can be seen between the horror- movies of the 60's and the play *Irma Vep*?

★ What sensational comic-style publications are available today? Who is the target market?

★ The special effects and complex set are integral to this play as are the elaborate costuming devices. Estimate the cost of such a production.

Study Guide provided by:

Sudbury Theatre Centre 170, Shaughnessy Street, Sudbury ON P3E 4P8