

Fri, May. 14, 2004

Gender-bending brilliance

Two actors' portrayals befit wink to melodrama

By Amy Hyczko

"The Mystery of Irma Vep" fulfills its comedic role with a twist on sexual politics. Taboo topics, such as homosexuality and cross-dressing, are easily tamed by the absurdity of this play. With references to Shakespeare, Poe and Joyce, combined with a sympathetic werewolf, a hysteric vampire and Egyptian parodies, Charles Ludlum's spoof on Gothic melodrama adds his own flamboyant flair to social commentary.

Written with a series of other comedies for his Ridiculous Theater Co. based in New York, "The Mystery of Irma Vep" is Ludlum's best-known play.



Actors Dan Matisa ("The Immigrant," "Taming of the Shrew") and Ken Sonkin ("Twelfth Night," "American Buffalo") dash about the stage in a mad fury to the audiences delight. In total, "Irma Vep" includes eight roles, (all acted by Matisa and Sonkin), 14 costumes, eight wigs, 10 hats and headdresses and 48 -- dare I repeat -- 48 costume changes.

The eclectic duo plays each character with resilience and spunk, creating a humorous pair that is easy to watch. Keeping speed with the play's fast pace, the two hardly appear frazzled from the wear and tare of changing costumes so frequently: an impressive feat, considering how the actors run about.

From the moors and manor of Mandacrest, to the crypts in Egypt, and back to Mandacrest, this three-act play will leave a plot connoisseur wondering, "plot ... what plot?"

In a quest to identify the mystery of Irma and how she died, a slew of interesting characters is introduced. At times the story is rather thin, however, the numerous one-liners are guaranteed to make even the glummiest person laugh with puns that everyone can enjoy. A particular favorite of mine is the shrewd comment by Lady Enid Hillcrest, (Sonkin), in which with a sly tilt of the head and wry grin the audience hears, "Well then, a man who dresses as a woman can't be all bad..." Indeed.

The opening scene reveals a Victorian-like Mandacrest, the home of Lord and Lady Hillcrest (do we see a pattern here?) where the late Irma Vep gawks at the audience from a hideous portrait hanging above the fireplace. The candle on the mantel, set as a sort of shrine to Lord Edgar's late wife, makes the awful portrait all the more amusing. We are introduced to Jane Twisden (Matisa), a terse, uptight maid with bad hair and an unhealthy attachment to Irma and to the wooden-legged Nicodemus Underwood (Sonkin), a Scottish groundskeeper for Lord Edgar. Both banter back and forth about Irma, until Nicodemus leaves and is replaced by Lady Enid. Soon after Jane takes her leave and in comes an intruder (Matisa) who promptly attacks Lady Enid. The scene continues and somehow (I'm still unclear as to why) the audience is taken to Egypt for Act II.

The play continues in the same silly style throughout Acts II and III, and we are introduced to a few new characters. Jane and Nicodemus are replaced by the creepy tour guide, Alcazar (Sonkin), with Lord Edgar (Matisa) and Pev Amri (Sonkin) -- the Egyptian mummy goddess resurrected by Lord Edgar. I'm not sure which is funnier: the stunt of Edgar and Alcazar climbing through the audience (literally) in search of their sacred tomb; Alcazar's repeated mistake of calling the seven-foot sarcophagus a "sarco-fag-us"; or the ridiculous Pev Amri, a boisterous confused 2000-year-old Egyptian mummy desperate for food. The plot thickens? I think not. For whatever reason, Lord Edgar brings the "sarco-fag-us" back to Mandacrest, and we are at the opening of Act III.

In this final scene at Mandacrest, which oddly includes a werewolf and a vampire, the audience is finally shown the mystery surrounding Irma Vep. Although the play has a "see-it-to-believe-it" type of ending, it nonetheless leaves the audience laughing.

Fun, extravagant and bound with laughs, director Brant Pope brings "The Mystery of Irma Vep" to the stage with an accurate depiction of Ludlum's brilliance. A must-see show, it was cited in 1984 by Time magazine and The New York Times as "one of the best plays of the year." I concur.

By Amy Hyczko, for the CDT