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## SCRT'S 'IRMA' GOOD, QUICK FUN

BY DAN TAYLOR September 10, 2004

A great gimmick can kill a show if the performers trust it to carry them, but Sonoma County Repertory Theater's "The Mystery of Irma Vep" still would rate a visit even without its trickery.

Directed by Squire Fridell, Scott Phillips and Ken Sonkin not only play seven characters between them but give a great comic performance in every role. Each actor is required to change costumes, characters and even genders between his exit on one side of the stage and his almost immediate re-entry on the other side. They're changing clothes while racing behind the backdrop.



Scott Phillips and Ken Sonkin in  
The Myster of Irma Vep at Sonoma Rep

That would be funny enough, but Phillips and Sonkin make each of the characters consistently comic in his, or her, own way.

Set in a spooky English manor with thunder and wolf howls sounding in the background, author Charles Ludlam's "Irma" tells the story of a British noble (Phillips) who marries an ex-actress (Sonkin) while still mourning the loss of his first wife.

The maid (Phillips again) scares the new bride with tales of strange doings on the moor, while a hunchbacked, peg-legged, bald-headed servant (Sonkin) stumps in and out of the parlor.

During a fast-paced, madcap two hours, the pair also portray, between the two of them, a fez-wearing guide with a Peter Lorre accent, a long-entombed Egyptian princess and a mysterious intruder.

Each character has great moments. The guide, for example, swears in Middle Eastern menu items: "Falafel!" "Couscous!"

The actors would deserve some praise for their accomplishment if all they did was keep all the bits of business straight, but they do much more than that. They get all the roles right as well. Sonkin's hunchback wins sympathy as well as laughs, and as the trembling bride, he earns concern as well as smirks. Phillips' lord of the manor possesses a certain stiff-necked English

heroism. And as the maid, knocking back hot toddies greedily but tidily, Phillips gossips with malicious glee.

Most of the action takes place on one fairly confined set, but designer Benicia Martinez manages to suggest a manor on the moor within a small space. Costumes designed by Julia Kwitchoff evoke the place and period but also look funny enough to fit the rest of the show. Sound design by director Fridell adds to the spooky atmosphere, appropriate for a show packed with references to vampires, werewolves and mummies.

The script, sprinkled with double meanings and misquoted classics, slyly suggests that the actors know they're playing multiple characters who can never meet on stage, and even that they're often in drag. But the actors never break character.

If you're hoping for a probing contemplation of the human condition you'll have to wait for another show, but as Stephen Sondheim once wrote, "Tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight."

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Where: Sonoma County Repertory Theater, 104 N. Main St., Sebastopol

When: 8 tonight and Saturday; continues Thursdays through Saturdays until Oct. 2. Matinee at 2 p.m. Sept. 19 Tickets: \$18 general; \$15 seniors a22nd students. Every Thursday is "Pay What You Can Night."

Information: 823-0177, [www.the-rep.com](http://www.the-rep.com)

Bottom Line: Two quick-change artists race through eight roles in two hours for a high-energy comic performance. And the best part is: Every character is expertly performed.