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Charles Ludlam's



Ridiculous Theatrical Co.

By Ronald Argelander

When I was in conventional theatre, even when I was going to school, people thought my acting was too broad, too pasty. So I had to create a theatre where I could exist. I had to create, for my own survival, a world where I could take advantage of my talents.

Charles Ludlam

In 1967, Charles Ludlam organized the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, patterning it after modern dance companies where composer and choreographer perform with the group. It was an actors' company, primarily composed of untrained actors, non-actors, and filmmakers. Most had experience working in "underground" films, but few had any professional training. Ludlam was the only one of the group with extensive schooling and experience in acting, directing, and playwriting. For the last seven years, he has been responsible for writing, directing, and acting the lead roles in the company's plays: *Big Hotel* (1967), *Conquest of the Universe/When Queens Collide* (1968), *Whores of Babylon* (by Bill Vehr, 1968), *Turds in Hell* (by Ludlam and Vehr, 1969), *The Grand Tarot* (first version, 1969), *Bluebeard* (1970), *The Grand Tarot* (second version, 1971), *Eunuchs of the Forbidden City* (1971), *Corn* (1972),

The title photograph by Tom Harding is from a moment in Act II of *Hot Ice* in which Bunny Beswick (Georg Osterman) tells Irmtraut "Moms" Mortimer (Lola Pashalinski) that she's going to give herself up. John Brockmeyer is in foreground; Black-eyed Susan remains in the Cryo-capsule.

Camille (1973), and *Hot Ice* (1974). Today, in addition to Ludlam, the Ridiculous Theatrical Company consists of John Brockmeyer, Jack Mallory, Lola Pashalinski, Black-Eyed Susan, Bill Vehr, Richard Currie, Robert Beers, Georg Osterman, and Stephen Sterne.

As head of the company, Ludlam has worked with the raw material of his fellow members—seeing what they did best or what was unique about them—and crafted plays around their talents. An intimate way of working has emerged based on a shared creative sensibility most like the activity of play—the kind of play children share in creating backyard fantasy drama. It is a sensibility that takes plots, dialog, and characters from movies, comics, and other familiar or personal sources; that considers role creation as everything except “playing oneself”—it is disguise, sexual role switching, artifice, caricature, stereotype; in which acting is broad and expressive but not “good” or “bad.”

Although Ludlam is credited with writing the company’s plays, it is because of the way the company works that the plays are written. Members of the company are constantly exchanging ideas for plays, sharing desires for roles, inventing visual gags and bits of business, watching each other in performances and making suggestions, and contributing lines of dialog and plot maneuvers that are added to the play. There are usually many ideas for plays being discussed among the members of the group simultaneously. Each idea is at a different level of development. Some, like the proposed *Jack and the Beanstalk* and *Fashion Bound*, are now awaiting the right time for production; others are still in the early stage of planning. “For months and months before we even start rehearsing a play,” explains Jack Mallory, “Charles will be talking about the next play and the play after that. The company discussed doing *Camille* for five years before getting around to doing it. We’ve been talking about *Hot Ice* for nearly two years.”

Usually, the plot comes from a movie. “None of us saw that much theatre,” says Ludlam. “Most of our ‘theatrical’ experiences were in the cinema; that’s where we saw plot and began to develop our ideas about it.” Characters may also come from the film, but there is usually no attempt at imitation. Often, Ludlam’s plots blend characters from several sources, and in piecing them together he designs a play to fit the members of the company.

Hot Ice, the company’s most recent play, began with an idea that developed when Ludlam was living with a macrobiotic couple who believed in euthanasia—mercy killing. “I never felt really comfortable with the idea,” says Ludlam. “Some other friends of mine were involved with cryonics—low temperature biology; freezing people after death until a cure is found for their disease. These people I was living with thought cryonics was a big joke. We talked about it, and I sent away for some material. The whole idea of cryonics versus euthanasia began to evolve in my mind.”

The idea was discussed among members of the group, but it was not until Ludlam saw James Cagney’s film, *White Heat*, that he found the cops-versus-gangsters form for the play, the main characters, and the basic relationship between them. “The next day after I saw the movie, I drafted the plot outline,” says Ludlam. The outline was discussed by members of the group whenever they got together.

The characters and relationships between the members of the cryonics gang were in the film: the mother-and-son team, the epileptic seizures, the son’s glamorous girlfriend, and the animosity between the mother and the girlfriend. John Brockmeyer could not play Max Mortimer as a “Cagney” role because of the great dissimilarity between them physically. Brockmeyer is tall and lanky. But imitation is not the way he (or the rest of the company) works in creating a role.

Red-headed Georg Osterman, the company's specialist in female impersonation, was the obvious choice for the "Jewish princess" girlfriend. She became a gum-chewing slut in green silk hot-pants and fox-fur jacket.

A second plot, involving Ramona Malone (Black-Eyed Susan) and an attempt to recover her forfeited heirloom diamonds, was interwoven through the cops-and-robbers story. Susan decided that her character should be "wacky," so she began to watch Burns and Allen reruns on television, developing lines, speech mannerisms, and an incongruity of thought like Gracie Allen. Lola Pashalinski wanted to do a bit she had seen in the movie *The House on 92nd Street* in which the mysterious Mr. Christopher was a woman in man's clothes. Her dark suit, tie, and hat disguise evolved from this.

Bill Vehr said that he would like to play a narrator and that a crime play would be a good opportunity for it, but he had no idea what the role would entail until Ludlam began to write it. "I had never used a narrator before," explains Ludlam, "but I liked radio serials. I thought I'd use the narrator that way—the convention of the narrator would move it along. I wanted the quality of an action story in *Hot Ice*."

There was only a scenario, containing the names of the characters, and a few pages of dialog when rehearsals began on *Hot Ice*. Most of the dialog was written by Ludlam, but it came gradually during rehearsal. The play got bigger night by night as he produced a few pages of dialog at a time. The company improvised dialog, plot maneuvers, and scenes in rehearsal; often, a scripted scene would burst into improvisation. "A lot of times," says Ludlam, "an actor will improvise a whole thing, and he could never repeat it again. But I have total recall when it comes to dialog. So I go home and write it down word-for-word as he said it and hand it back to him the next night. It's a very intimate way of working. It involves many trips back to the typewriter, dragging the script that was written that morning into rehearsal and hammering it out on stage that evening. It makes the plays very organic and personal to us." "Some of the last part of this play was dictated right on stage at rehearsal," Mallory explains. "Charles said lines, and people memorized the lines in front of him." It was not until the second month of rehearsals that there was a complete second act and runthroughs of *Hot Ice* could take place.

The ending of *Hot Ice* presented Ludlam with a major problem. All of the company's plays before *Corn* had ended tragically or with the characters suffering degradation or humiliation. "*Corn* was the turning point," explains Ludlam, "when I realized that the synthesis of opposites is the basic magic act. It's at the basis of all metaphysics. And I realized that this was what comedy had that tragedy didn't have. For me now, that is a major esthetic problem: how to have a happy ending. The Cagney film doesn't. The criminal undergoes a total transference when the agent relieves him of his seizure and actually loves him, but the agent remains the predator to the end and kills him. I found that extremely disturbing. To me the betrayal of love was so horrible that I couldn't get over it; I couldn't deal with it. The disturbing thing to me was that the cop betrayed the trust, and I couldn't play that, because I'm playing opposite John Brockmeyer, whom I love." It also bothered Ludlam that, by the end of the film, the "good guys" kill all of the "bad guys." This is one reason why two endings were developed and performed in *Hot Ice*.

"A lot of directors block before they go to the rehearsal, then they come in and dictate the movements as they visualize them. A lot of them work with models, miniatures, etc. I don't find that interesting," states Ludlam. "Being an actor myself, I can't see that it's any use in creating an exciting event." As a director, Ludlam has tried to

work with what is already there rather than from a preconception of what “ought” to be there. “Trying to realize a conception is just frustration,” he says.

From the beginning you're into one compromise after another until you're left with something not at all like what you imagined. I don't bother to imagine. I just go in there and see what is there and try to develop that. I usually find that the best directing I do is when I don't direct. This sounds like a Zen Buddhist approach, but a lot of times you're really tampering with something delicate. It's even dangerous sometimes to tell an actor that something he's doing is good. The next time it's like a blossom that's been touched—you destroy it.

One little trick I do know about staging something is to interrupt the scene and start a discussion. Suddenly all the physical relationships change; people start leaning, talking, moving in a different way that is totally real to the way they are to each other, and then you see how the scene would be in real life.

Susan: Our rehearsals are comfortable because we take a playful approach. We enjoy ourselves. In creating a character, all of a sudden we'll do something outrageous—go out on a limb—and the people you're with begin to laugh, and that's an encouraging sign.

Ludlam: We try to break each other up a lot.

Susan: It builds confidence to go out on a limb and be appreciated. And we start playing off one another—It's all playful. There's no threat. It's just fun. As long as we have fun, it's pretty much guaranteed that the audience will have fun.

Ludlam: Breaking-up is an indication that the thing is working. That it's funny. It's part of the atmosphere of rehearsal—enjoyment.

But one of the most difficult things in rehearsing comedy, Ludlam points out, is that “something that gets a laugh once, and you know it's good, may never get a laugh again during rehearsal, because the surprise is gone, or people have seen you do it so many times. There's a tendency to drop it before opening night, forgetting how funny it was the first time. That's a problem—keeping things in; instinct reminding the actors that something was good, that it worked; and to trust that it will be funny again for people who haven't seen it yet.”

Play is very much a part of Ridiculous rehearsals. Implicit in the idea of play is the ability to engage in and disengage from the activity at will. A certain intellectual detachment is maintained. Play exists from moment to moment. It is not to be taken seriously. It is a way of taking sides for the fun of it. Play is pretense and is not to be mistaken for reality.

Play can become child play, and material from childhood can aid characterization. The gangster character, Max Mortimer, in *Hot Ice* (the Cagney role in *White Heat*) has seizures that only his mother can eliminate with a massage. For John

*Buck Armstrong (Charles Ludlam) and Ramona Malone (Black-Eyed Susan) preparing for a secret mission in Act I of **Hot Ice**. Behind them is the narrator (Bill Vehr).*

Photo Tom Harding



Brockmeyer, who was playing the role, the seizures became a problem. They were not funny but pathetic and weak. The character had to have them, however, because his disguised opponent, Buck Armstrong, would relieve him of them and gain his confidence. In rehearsals, Lola Pashalinski, as his mother, massaged the back of his neck to relieve the seizures. "Then one night it came to me," explains Brockmeyer, "that she should be doing this [strokes his throat] because we used to do this in grade school [strokes his neck and spits]." From this childhood memory, developed the bit in which Moms masturbated Max's neck during a seizure, and Max had an orgasm with saliva.

Ludlam's job as director/writer/actor is to encourage play, then fit the results into a script. Thus, the performances have a spontaneous playfulness about them even though they are set. (Continuing changes in the script can also produce a sense of spontaneity. "Often during the middle of a run," recalls Bill Vehr, "Charles will come in right before we go on and he'll say, 'You say this . . . and you say this . . .' And you're going, 'Wait, what was that?' And you're writing on your hand, hoping to get a chance to look at it before it comes time to say it. That happens a lot, and those things are usually good, in a way, because they're fresh and new, they have never been rehearsed, and the first time you say them is in front of an audience.")

As an actor himself, Ludlam has tried to encourage and develop the idea, in his company, of the actor as an "autonomous artist" rather than a "puppet" to be manipulated by playwright and director. He does not dictate the psychology of the character or block movements. "When the actor becomes a primary creator," he says, "he is totally responsible for who he is on stage." He believes in theatre in which "you're working intuitively and people are projecting images of what their role will

be. Finally, the most profound theme of the theatre is this business of role play—that roles are interchangeable, that personality is an artifice in life, and that it can be changed or interchanged. When each actor is working, partially through wish-fulfillment or whatever, to project his idea of what the character he will play will be, we begin to find the ‘play’ in these characters.”

Ludlam recalls reading a book in college that left a strong impression on his approach to the craft of role creation. The author stated that before he learned one line, he went to the costume room, stood in front of the mirror, found the costume, did the makeup, and, when the character was staring back at him out of the mirror, then he could begin to work on the role. “I think it’s that way for us,” Ludlam says.

This freedom allowed the actor in creating a role is, in Ludlam’s words, “terrifying to most actors. It’s like having nothing to go on but yourself, an immediate situation, and your co-workers. The actor creates the role in a primary way—from his own imagination, wish-fulfillment, and fantasy life. It’s your creation; it’s more daring. This way there’s a lot invested in our roles, and the risks are great working this way. In our company, there is virtually no risk, though, because we all work that way. Since we share this way of working, there’s something going on that makes it possible to be that free. It is this relationship that we have, which is a very delicate one, and a unique one. I don’t think it’s something anyone could just set out to have. We didn’t set out to have this kind of relationship. It grew out of many years of work, and it requires a special atmosphere. One has to create an environment where this can go on. It’s really not something an actor can do completely on his own, without sympathetic co-workers who feel that way about it as well.”

One of the most striking characteristics of role-playing in the Ridiculous Theatrical Company is the fact that every member (except Black-Eyed Susan, who, however, will have young-boy roles in the forth-coming *Fashion Bound* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*) has, at one time, played transvestite roles. The androgynous sexual sensibility that the members of the group cultivate frees them from any limitations on acting-out any part of their fantasy life. Everyone in the company wants to play a character of the opposite sex—each for different reasons. Some because it is an extension of the way they themselves are in real life; others because it provides a contrast to the way they see themselves. Most of the members have more than one sexual identity. This may be true of most people, but the Ridiculous Theatrical Company lives this multiple sexual identity out on the stage.

Staged transvestism or theatrical sexual role-switching has been treated in countless plays, films, and community “firehouse” reviews as a comic reaffirmation of strict sexual role division. “Drag” is denigrated by showing how impossible it is for a man to successfully create the role of a woman (and vice versa) except for the purpose of derisive laughter. At the Theatre of the Ridiculous, the laughter is not derisive. They entertain the idea that strict biological/social sexual division may be a cruel joke that nature/society is playing on humanity. For them, and in their performances, pansexuality is a reality.

Yet there is no overt sexual “message.” “We are not a group,” states Ludlam, “that is proselytizing one kind of an idea—ready-made content, like political theatre, or any group that takes on a cause. To us, this has always been a cop-out. We’re involved in a certain kind of consciousness that does not permit codifying a specific philosophy and proselytizing it.” As Lola Pashalinski puts it, “We express things from our sensibilities and our philosophy, but we don’t give people ‘messages.’ We just reflect our own personal view of life.”