

A (Wo)man Apart: Charles Ludlam's Approach to Drag
Performance

by

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Charles Ludlam, one of the foremost queer theatre artists of the Off-Off-Broadway movement, believed that “many actors *want* to try” acting in drag (Samuels 137). I have no qualms about admitting that the opportunity to do drag is what attracted me to his work. As I prepared to perform in a production of his play *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, I familiarized myself with the trajectory of Ludlam's career by reading his complete works, his biography, reviews, and scholarly articles on his work. I also began reading about the socio-historical context Ludlam worked in, focusing especially on his adopted home of downtown New York and the burgeoning gay community that took up residence there. As I delved deeper into Ludlam's life and work, I became interested in the roles in which Ludlam himself played women. While both his early works and *Irma Vep* feature Ludlam in drag at least part of the time, I focused on the three plays in which Ludlam spent the entire piece playing a single woman: *Camille* (1971), *Galas* (1983), and *Salammbô* (1985). Looking at articles, journalistic writings, and press reviews for each of these shows, I noticed that Ludlam's performances as women were consistently praised for being fundamentally different than most drag shows. As I prepared to perform a female role written by Ludlam, I became interested in his approach to doing drag. I wondered what made his performances so distinct. After all, he was still a man hoping to entertain people by dressing up as a woman. A man considered a master of comic acting and a consummate drag actor is not a bad role model to emulate, so I eagerly began exploring Ludlam's work, looking for advice on how to best impersonate a woman on

stage. As I quickly found out, Ludlam saw drag in a much more complex way than I had been conceptualizing it.

My investigation eventually evolved two major lines of research. The first surveyed the history and social characteristics and implications of drag performance, particularly during Ludlam's lifetime. The second focused on Ludlam's performance aesthetic within the context of the theatre scene, especially his approach to acting. In this portion of the research, I examined interviews Ludlam gave to various journalists and scholars. I also relied heavily on Steven Samuels' indispensable *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly*, an edited collection of Ludlam's views on life and theatre. As I familiarized myself with Ludlam's voice as well as his artistic and political stances, I came to see how his views on drag diverged from most queens. In contrast to the drag shows seen in gay bars and clubs across the country, which, as I will later detail, trafficked in problematic and often misogynist depictions of femininity, Ludlam's performances combined gently mocking comedy with a committed psychological exploration of character. Ludlam seemed to take a different attitude than most drag queens towards performing women, investing his female personas with emotional depth rather than merely outfitting them in sequins and heels. Reviewing *Salammbô*, in which Ludlam would give his final performance in a female role before his untimely death from AIDS, *The New York Times*' Frank Rich wrote that Ludlam's performance achieved "a dignity" uncharacteristic of most drag performance.

I believe the dignity Rich refers to stems from the way in which Ludlam used Stanislavskian acting techniques to explore the inner psychological motivations of the

women he played. Referring to his female roles, Ludlam said, “I want to be taken seriously as an actress,” revealing his belief that his work on female roles was acting rather than merely physical impersonation (Samuels 256). Rather than showing spectators how well he could create the illusion of femininity relying exclusively on visual techniques, Ludlam established a theatrical suspension of disbelief through an accurate depiction of female emotional experience, which he referred to as “intimate psychological truth” (Samuels 43). A detailed exposition of Stanislavsky’s acting system is beyond the scope of this essay, but a brief examination of the tenets of the Russian director’s guidelines for acting will provide sufficient background for a discussion of Ludlam’s work in drag.

In her article discussing Stanislavsky’s system, scholar Sharon Marie Carnicke writes, “From a practical point of view, the system suggests specific techniques that help actors develop a state of mind and body that encourages ‘experiencing’” (18). Seeking to correct the dubious translation of this term that practitioners such as Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler took to mean “living the role,” Carnicke posits that in Stanislavsky’s Russian writings, the term’s meaning was closer to “to go through” or “to live through” the role. According to Carnicke, this approach does not mean seeking out the experiences of a character in real life, but using “emotional memory” to exist “fully within the immediate moment” of the play (18-19). By recalling psychological “memories” similar to the experiences of a given character, the emotions demanded by the role resonate through the actor’s body and are conveyed to the audience. Ludlam was a firm proponent of this technique, classifying himself as a

“Stanislavsky actor par excellence” (Ludlam in Tomkins 96). As I will discuss later, this psychological work was integral to his approach to creating a character.

By performing drag roles using tenets of psychological realism rather than focusing primarily on the outward appearance of femininity, Ludlam radically reimagined the links between gender, the body, and society. He also used drag as a theatrical technique that circumvented traditional theatre’s commitment to typecasting, subverting the traditional logic that connects gender to specific behaviors and bodily characteristics. In his belief that casting was “a matter of the part in the play, not the sex of the performer or the character,” Ludlam challenged both social and theatrical convention (40).

In my discussion of Ludlam’s particular contributions to American theatre, acting, and social perceptions of gender, I begin this essay with a brief discussion of the historical and artistic context in which Ludlam began his theatrical career. Next, an analysis of drag performance in the late 1960s illuminates how this type of drag reified a system of binary gender built on sexist notions of male privilege- a position that Ludlam refused in his performances. I then explore how Ludlam’s drag was grounded in psychological realism, focusing on *Camille* as exemplary of the way in which he diverged from most drag performance. After a discussion of the ways in which his approach to acting subverted oppressive tenets of traditional binary gender and expanded the perception of embodiment in American drama, I conclude with a discussion of the political implications Ludlam saw in his work.

Ludlam’s willingness to openly discuss his career combined with his penchant for comic exaggeration make him a difficult man to fully comprehend. For every quote

characterizing his work as political, there is yet another where he decries the label. For every instance in which he professes to love camp, there is a comment in which he disavows its relevance to his work. Reading the bulk of his writings and interviews, I initially found him to be frustratingly inconsistent in his beliefs about theatre. Although an exhortation to explore contradiction is enshrined in the manifesto he wrote for his company, I realized that what I thought was willfully contradictory was in fact Ludlam circling closer and closer to a clear and unambiguous articulation of his aesthetic.¹ By refusing to accept the theatrical and social conventions that would cast certain bodies in certain roles determined by categories like gender and sexuality, his proposed aesthetic freed actors from the tyranny of typecasting and suggested the social roles that so rigidly structure the daily lives of both actors and spectators could be transgressed. Ludlam believed that if the part in the play was “suitable, anyone- any sex- can play it” (Samuels 40). In Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company, it did not matter how you looked or what gender you were. What mattered to him was not how well the person playing a given role fit the character or looked the part according to traditional standards, but how well that person could embody the role using a psychological process grounded in the tenets of psychological realism. By allowing actors to explore how categorical identities like male, female, gay, and straight could be reside in a single body, Ludlam’s aesthetic was unmistakably queer, encouraging his collaborators and spectators to think about identity in terms of *and* rather than *or*.

America in the 1960s: “The Time Was Ripe for Revolution”²

The 1960s, a decade of great sociopolitical changes in America, brought the idea of identity politics to the forefront of the national consciousness. On an international scale, the Cold War threatened annihilation of life on Earth with large-scale nuclear destruction. As the Soviet Union challenged American international dominance, identity-based reform movements swept the nation, upending the social order that had been forged in the wake of World War II. The 1950s Civil Rights Movement had evolved into a major force by the early 1960s. As the second wave of feminist thought crested in the middle of the decade, the core of American patriarchy was under attack by millions of women who were not satisfied with the subservient role they were expected to take on. By 1965 the American counterculture was in full flower, bringing drug use, rock and roll, and communal living into the national consciousness. Students and young people protested against the Vietnam War, a public outcry that intensified with the reinstatement of the military draft in 1966. Capped by the Woodstock Festival in the summer of 1969, the countercultural movement presented a visible rejection of the values many Americans held dear. Mass media brought images of the war and the protests it sparked into homes across the country, radically changing the way people viewed themselves in relation to other social groups and to the state. All across America, a new social order was being forged as activist movements cohered around identities categories such as race, gender, and sexual orientation.

While many aspects of this cultural refashioning shocked the establishment, perhaps none did more so than the sexual revolution that went hand-in-hand with the

American counterculture movement. Beginning in 1960, the widespread availability of the birth control pill meant that sex and procreation were no longer so intimately linked, giving millions of women and men the chance to experiment with casual sex. The eminent treatability of previously crippling venereal diseases such as syphilis meant that many people took advantage of relaxed social attitudes towards sex. In the era of free love, it was not only heterosexuals exploring the reconfigured sexual landscape. Homosexuals were also embracing the permissiveness of the period, beginning to step out of the closet and into mainstream consciousness.

Much like the Civil Rights Movement, the gay rights movement had its roots in the 1950s. Published in 1948, the first Kinsey Report established the widespread practice of male homosexual behavior. This shocking public revelation, although based on methodologically suspect statistics, increased the social visibility of homosexual behavior.³ In the following years, the first homophile organizations were formed. The most prominent of these, the Mattachine Society, was a group of male homosexual activists dedicated to the task of normalizing homosexuality. At the time, homosexuality was considered deviant, a belief reflected in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders classification as a psychological disorder. The Mattachine Society strove to unite homosexuals and foster tolerance and acceptance, but this mission was profoundly difficult in the context of the pre-sexual revolution 1950s. By the end of the decade, the Mattachine Society had splintered into several regional groups that continued to fight for gay rights in more localized contexts.⁴

While the national organization of the Mattachine Society collapsed after a decade of working to unite and politically strengthen the homosexual community, its

struggles were not in vain. As the 1960s brought an ever-increasing visibility to a burgeoning social group, a new type of gay life was beginning to emerge. The growing presence of open homosexuals began to attract the attention of the mainstream media. Even *Life* magazine, a heavily circulated family-oriented periodical, published a major story on the subject, titled “Homosexuality in America”. The feature still reflected a homophobic stance, calling the homosexual world “sad” and “sordid,” but the fact that a magazine of mainstream reach such as *Life* published on the topic was indicative of homosexuality’s shifting relationship to mass culture (66). Gay life was transforming from what one historian of the period describes as “a secret society of introductions, special knocks, passwords, [and] highly codified behavior” into a more public and present subculture (Shewey 127).

The emergent gay subculture was heavily centered in major urban areas. Chief among these was New York City, which by the middle of the decade had become a gay male playground. Parts of the City’s downtown, especially Greenwich Village, had garnered a reputation for accepting alternative lifestyles. Men would cruise for gay sex and find it with hardly any trouble. Bathhouses made homosexual sex instantly available. Men congregated for anonymous sex in empty trailer trucks parked by the Hudson River docks in the West Village.⁵ The growing presence of gay men in downtown New York was often flamboyantly expressed, and drag queens were an especially common sight. By the mid-1960s, parts of downtown were thoroughly queer.

The growing frankness with which many homosexuals went about finding sex partners paralleled the matter-of-factness with which heterosexuals went about doing

the same thing in the heyday of the swinging sixties. But since homosexual activity was still punishable by law, the men and women who populated the homosexual bars and nightclubs of downtown New York sometimes had to deal with police raids.⁶

These usually took the form of the authorities unexpectedly invading an establishment to make sure that no illegal behavior was taking place. Usually, these raids resulted in no actual arrests, functioning as a reassertion of state power and surveillance. However, near the end of the decade, one such raid took a much different course, igniting a nationwide movement.

On the evening of June 28, 1969, a group of men and women had gathered at the Stonewall Inn to drink after having attended Judy Garland's funeral uptown. When police entered the bar and arrested a few patrons, the grief over the death of a beloved gay icon spurred some of the men and women who were present to fight back. They began throwing things at the police officers, and for three days Christopher Street became the site of a sometimes-violent clash between police and the downtown gay community.⁷ The Stonewall Riots, as they would later come to be called, sparked new fervor for an organized push for homosexual rights and recognition. In an era of new social liberation, homosexuals were finally ready to fight for acceptance.

Along with the rise of more liberal social norms, the 1960s saw the rise of a new avant-garde in American art. As the de facto cultural capitol of America, New York became the epicenter of this movement. Flocking to parts of the city where rent was dirt cheap, artists took the experimental impulses of the time and applied them to previously held artistic ideals. In coffee shops, lofts, and storefronts all across New York, the art world was undergoing rapid transformation. Conceptual artists began

undermining the importance of the art object, instead preferring to focus on ideas and processes. The Fluxus movement staged simple and humorous events all over New York, challenging the commercialization and commodification of art. Happenings were hip, and audiences packed all sorts of spaces to experience spectacles that obliterated the traditional separation between performer and spectator. Andy Warhol's factory, churning out silk-screened pop icons and shockingly trashy films, blurred the line between high and low art.⁸ This new American avant-garde encompassed the theatre as well. The Living Theater, formed in 1947 by Julian Beck and Judith Malina, spent the sixties exploring "collective creation," a method of developing work meant to challenge the hierarchic structure of traditional theatre (Harding & Rosenthal 29). Joseph Chaikin's Open Theatre explored brashly physical acting techniques inspired by the work of Polish Director Jerzy Grotowski. Richard Schechner's Performance Group experimented with environmental theatre, shifting how audience members interacted with a performance in progress in an exploration of "radical actuality" (8). By the middle of the decade, alternative theater had coalesced into "a burgeoning phenomenon," showcased in venues such as Ellen Stewart's Café La MaMa and the Judson Memorial Church (Kaufman 63). Downtown New York had turned into a hotspot for anyone wishing to explore life and art outside the mainstream. The clarion call of the underground sounded across the country; among those who responded was Charles Ludlam, a man who, according to the *New York Times*, would become "one of the most prolific and flamboyant artists in the theater avant-garde" (Gerard).

“But this is just ridiculous!”⁹

Before moving to New York City in 1965, Ludlam was a speech-drama student at Hofstra University. The eldest son of a traditional, middle-class household in suburban Long Island, Ludlam enrolled at Hofstra University with ambitions to become a leading actor. His goal was complicated by two major realizations that became clear to Ludlam over the course of his college career. The first was that he was gay, an identity at odds with the resolute heterosexuality of most leading male roles. The second was that his acting teachers believed he was not cut out for these roles, calling his acting too broad and pushing him to write and direct instead. Indeed, Ludlam did not look like a leading man, with his large nose and already-receding hairline. Though Ludlam would appear in the Hofstra Theatre Department’s productions, he was always stranded in smaller roles, his physical appearance and flamboyant nature keeping him out of the spotlight. He resented being perceived strictly as a character actor, and felt that his teachers were too hung up on measuring their students’ talent using traditional notions of what was good and bad acting. He knew he was talented, but felt his teachers’ prejudices were holding him back. After graduation, he eagerly moved to a tenement apartment on the Lower East Side and began exploring the city, a place where men were not always straight, women were not always women, and theater was anything but traditional.

The potent aura of experimentation that pervaded Ludlam’s new neighborhood gave him countless opportunities to take advantage of his newfound freedom from sexual and artistic mores. Ludlam immediately began frequenting gay bathhouses and parading up and down Christopher Street, where men cruised each other for casual

sex. While he was sampling New York City's smorgasbord of sexual opportunities, Ludlam also began to frequent experimental theater productions held in loft spaces and art galleries across downtown.

During this exploration of the downtown performance scene Ludlam stumbled across *The Life of Juanita Castro* and *Shower*, produced by a group that would later take the name The Play-House of the Ridiculous. Both of these plays were written by Ronald Tavel, directed by John Vaccaro, and designed by another downtown artist named Jack Smith. Willfully perverse, these two one-acts featured shockingly lewd dialogue, purposefully illogical plots, and brazenly homosexual content. Tavel, Vaccaro, and Smith, all of whom were gay, pioneered a new aesthetic that took the experimental spirit of the counterculture to deranged extremes. Tavel used the term Ridiculous to describe the group's work, later saying that one of their main aims was to do away with "dialectical understanding or linear thinking as a mode of progress within a script" (Tavel in Kaufman 50). Stefan Brecht, who chronicled the early years of the Ridiculous in his historical study *Queer Theatre*, wrote that these plays were "slovenly, amateurish, silly, [...] in sum, *stupid* and *immoral*" (28). Of course, this being the 1960s, Brecht considered these positive qualities, along with the work's "erotic," "playful," and "imaginative" nature (30). Ludlam was initially lukewarm about the work of Tavel and his collaborators, finding it confrontational and obtuse. Little did he know that by April of 1966 he would be acting in a Ridiculous production, or that by 1970 he would be considered the visionary leader of Ridiculous Theater.

Ludlam's involvement with the company began with a small role in *The Life of Lady Godiva*. After nearly stealing the show, he was given a leading role in *Indira Gandhi's Daring Device*, the company's next project. This play was to be preceded each night by a short improvised scenario called *Screen Test*. Based on a film script rejected by Andy Warhol, the scenario featured a film director leading a young starlet through a series of increasingly humiliating acting exercises. Mario Montez, a noted downtown drag performer and frequent Warhol collaborator, played the young starlet. Playing the role of the Director, Vaccaro seemed to revel in the position of power, and from the beginning of the rehearsal period Montez told Ludlam how difficult Vaccaro was to work with. After a few performances, the tension between Vaccaro and Montez was mounting. To defuse the situation before it got out of hand, Montez asked Ludlam to "go on in drag and liven things up" (Samuels 12).

Ludlam, who had no experience performing in drag, took Montez up on his invitation and revealed a natural affinity for female impersonation. A few days after Montez's plea for help, there was a commotion in the back of the audience not long after the evening's performance of *Screen Test* had begun. Vaccaro looked up to see Ludlam, in full drag, slinking toward the stage. "Oh John, what are you doing? Don't let me interrupt you," he cooed, launching into a pitch-perfect impersonation of Norma Desmond, the fading silent movie star from Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (Kaufman 57). Accustomed to interruptions, ad-libs, and improvisation in Ridiculous performances, Vaccaro was unfazed and began to play along immediately. The risky maneuver paid off for Ludlam- particularly when, after an over-the-top action that took Norma Desmond's final moments in the film to lunatic new heights, the

audience “broke into cheers and extended applause” (57). Later, Ronald Tavel, who would split with Smith, Vaccaro, and the rest of the company not long after *Screen Test*, said “That’s when I knew that this man was willing to do anything for a magical moment onstage, even to humiliate himself for the theater” (57). Ludlam’s willingness to embrace the ridiculous in exchange for laughter and applause became a guiding force in the work he would soon begin as the leader of his own company.

It should be noted that Ludlam and his collaborators believed the label Ridiculous was a badge of honor rather than a negative term. Ludlam would later say that the Ridiculous in the name of his company referred to the company itself: “we are ridiculous. We are not pointing a finger at others and saying *they’re* ridiculous. *We* are the buffoons” (Samuels 54). Ludlam believed that acknowledging that his company was worthy of ridicule allowed him to “refuse to take things seriously,” resulting in complete artistic freedom (30).

With his success in *Screen Test*, Ludlam emerged as a major creative force in the company that was now going by the name of The Play-House of the Ridiculous. His stature rose further when Tavel abruptly left the group after Vaccaro deemed his newest play, *Gorilla Queen*, too complicated to stage. Finding his company without a script to perform, Vaccaro urged Ludlam to finish writing *Big Hotel*, a collage piece he had been working on. Featuring a motley assortment of grotesque characters, myriad lines swiped from movies, books, and other plays, and little discernible plot, the play fit squarely within the Ridiculous aesthetic that Vaccaro, Tavel, and Smith had been exploring. Ludlam would later say that the play was one of his most modern works, and that he had written it “not caring whether any of it made sense or ever

came to an ending” (Samuels 19). The play would only run for a short time in early 1967 before the company was forced to close it because of a building-code infraction, but the generally favorable reception it received led Ludlam to keep writing. Not long after, he completed another play, *Conquest of the Universe*. During rehearsals, Vaccaro and Ludlam had a series of increasingly serious disagreements, which finally led to Vaccaro firing Ludlam from the production. Seven other actors resigned in protest and followed Ludlam, who suddenly found himself the de facto leader of what would soon become the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

For the next three years, Ludlam and his company of actors performed in locations all over Manhattan, producing scripts written by the fledgling artistic director. Even though Ludlam was no longer working with Ronald Tavel, the scripts he wrote during this period- which include *Big Hotel*, *Conquest of the Universe*, *Turds in Hell*, and *The Grand Tarot*- maintained Tavel’s “calculated disdain for logic, characterization, and story” (Kaufman 70). Ludlam’s early plays share very loose structures that served to connect whatever spectacular events the company could dream up. In a profile for *The New Yorker* written after Ludlam had found more critical and commercial success, Calvin Tomkins wrote, “Scripts exist for [...] *Turds in Hell* and *The Grand Tarot*, but they only dimly suggest the myriad happenings on stage.” These plays, he continued, were “sprawling, fantastic epics couched in a kaleidoscope of styles,” resembling nothing so much as “a three-ring circus staged in a closet” (77).

While these sprawling epics may have provided Ludlam and his company with the opportunity to do whatever they wanted on stage, they did not give any opportunity to explore a deeper psychological identification with character. In these early plays, the

characters populating the stage were outsize caricatures, vehicles for the actors to explore an outrageous, over-the-top presence. Their lines were familiar movie quotes. They launched volleys of lewd puns. They played archetypes and lofty symbols: God, the Devil, and Santa Claus. These types of characters fit well into Ludlam's crazed collages, but he would soon see the limitations of the style.

Ludlam's 1969 play *The Grand Tarot* took symbolic characterization to extremes. Billed as "a masque," each scene was based on one of the major arcana of The Tarot and each of the characters was based on a specific card of the Tarot deck (Ludlam 85). The performance's structure was determined by shuffling a deck of Tarot cards and laying them out, with the order of the cards determining the order of the scenes.¹⁰ Because the structure of the play was different each night, nothing close to a plot or character arcs ever emerged, preventing the actors from exploring character in any deep way. Stefan Brecht, in his characteristically wordy way, called the piece "a grandiose wreck of a play," that confronted the audience with an "opaquely glittering surface of high artistry" (82). Ludlam looked upon it less fondly, feeling that its "infinite plot [was] a negation of plot" (Samuels 23). After the show flopped miserably, Ludlam "began to see everything falling apart" and decided to write what he called "a well-made play" (23). *Bluebeard*, the result of this new resolve, was the company's first hit, thanks in no small part to its more traditional use of plot, character, and dramatic structure. Emboldened by the play's success, Ludlam never looked back to his ragged beginnings. Embracing plot and conflict as central to his theater, he would go on to write plays in a staggering number of styles and genres. This shift towards clearly defined plot and character was also a crucial development

that allowed him to pioneer a new approach to cross-gender acting, one based in psychological exploration rather than visual impersonation.

“Just as there are women and *women*”¹¹

Although his career as a writer and performer was characterized by artistic range, Ludlam gained notoriety as a drag performer. While Ludlam’s early drag work with the Play-House of the Ridiculous and his own company was well-received, he achieved widespread recognition as such after acting the leading role in his *Camille*, an adaptation of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *Fils*. Though Ludlam was a consummate drag actor, it is misleading to consider him only in this light. In fact, his male roles greatly outnumbered his female ones. Indeed, after he began writing plot- and character-focused pieces, he played women in only three of the twenty-four plays he wrote.¹² While Ludlam’s early work frequently featured him in drag, the critical and commercial success of *Camille* cemented the image of Ludlam as a drag performer. The enduring identification of Ludlam with this role implies that there was something special about *Camille*, an element that differentiated Ludlam’s performance from those of the drag queens that had become ubiquitous over the course of the 1960s.

A carefully calculated mix of comedy and psychological exploration of emotional depth marked Ludlam’s performance in *Camille*. Cannily lampooning feminine stereotypes, various reviewers of the show called Ludlam “a clown,” and “a master of theatrical parody” (Gussow; Lester). The actor’s focus on humor was counterbalanced by stretches of straightforward melodrama, which both critics and

audiences found genuinely moving. In a review of a 1974 revival of *Camille*, *The New York Times* critic Clive Barnes called Ludlam “a completely convincing *Camille*” (31). Michael Feingold wrote in *The Village Voice* that the audience “hush[ed] itself like children at church” during the play’s emotional scenes (77). *Camille* received as much notice for the emotional heights it scaled as it did for the sidesplitting laughter it promised to provoke.

Ludlam felt that it was his commitment to exploring women’s emotions that differentiated his work from that of most drag queens. Ludlam would later characterize his drag as playing a role of the opposite sex, an endeavor he saw as “more Oriental” than most drag done in the United States (Samuels 137). Placing his drag in the tradition of Kabuki Theatre, which uses male actors called *onnagata* who performed females onstage as well as in their daily lives, Ludlam was concerned with psychologically motivated acting rather than limiting his performance to the physical aspects of female characters. This position is clearly articulated in a quote he gave about *Camille*, which featured two other actors in female roles:

The three of us were *not* males trying to be females. *That* is drag: regaling yourself in feminine folderol for the sheer antics of pretending to be a woman. *We* were out there on that stage the same as everyone else—hoping to give an honest, bona fide account of ourselves as characters in a play (39).

Rather than being concerned strictly with creating the visual illusion of being a woman, Ludlam was interested in men giving honest performances of female emotion. This demand on the male actor’s psyche implies a relationship to femininity that stands in sharp contrast to most drag performance done in the late 1960s and

early 1970s. By examining the ideology that structured drag performance during that time and elaborating the relationship created between a male drag queen and femininity, one can begin to understand why Ludlam's drag was so memorable and groundbreaking.

As the 60s wore on, the scholarly *terra incognita* of the homosexual subculture began to command academic attention. Any attempt at studying this subculture was complicated by the social stigma surrounding homosexuality. In the pre-Stonewall era the closet door was still firmly shut: any ethnographer wishing to study homosexual men and women had to first deal with the reality that many potential subjects were unwilling to discuss their lives. Gay male drag performance was a logical subject of study for scholars because of the way in which drag queens unabashedly embraced a homosexual identity. While being gay was still sanctioned in most areas of American society, the drag show was a public social arena where being gay was celebrated, resulting in community. Free from the silence of the closet, many drag queens were unafraid to speak about their lives as homosexuals. Esther Newton was the first scholar to write about drag queens and the window they provided into a subculture struggling up from the underground towards mainstream recognition. Researching the world of drag queens from 1965 to 1966, her seminal *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* would be published in 1971. While Newton's writings on the drag performance of the time were considered groundbreaking in academia, it is important to remember that having men impersonate women in performance was in no way a new development.

As early as 1850, “the term ‘drag’ itself, the brake on a coach, had filtered from the cant of thieves and fences into homosexual slang, to connote the drag of a gown with a train” (Senelick, “Glamour Drag” 85). The practice of male actors playing female roles extends even further into the past, with many scholars locating its origin in the theatre of ancient Greece. Also featured prominently in the classical theatres of China and Japan, female impersonators have been utilized across cultures and historical eras.¹³ Usually the carnivalesque sight of a man dressed as a woman was meant to evoke laughter from the audience. While the drag queens of the 1960s did not shy away from humor in their performances, the changing cultural context in which they performed meant that their public dress wearing took on new social valences. As homosexuality was established as a widespread phenomenon rather than an isolated perversion, drag performance became not merely a comic inversion of the established social order but a celebration of a highly subversive sexual identity and social agency.

A homosexual identity subverts the dominant social ideals surrounding gender and sexuality that structure American society. Lesbian feminist scholar Adrienne Rich has usefully theorized these dominant ideals as a system of thought she calls “compulsory heterosexuality” (237). This “cultural logic” is a set of normative ideals that structure thought and practice surrounding gender, sexuality, and the link between the two (McNeal 346). In his article *Behind the Make-Up: Gender Ambivalence and the Double-Bind of Gay Selfhood in Drag Performance*, anthropologist Keith E. McNeal articulates this implicit cultural logic and its implications for drag performance. Because contemporary ideas about gender and sexuality are inextricably linked to

sexual orientation and object choice, a person's masculinity and/or femininity are socially determined in part by their sexual preferences. As McNeal writes, "femininity is associated with desiring and attracting men (male erotic object choice) and masculinity is associated with desiring and attracting women (female erotic object choice)" (350). Sexual preference, however, is not the only criteria by which our society determines masculinity and femininity. Biology is also considered, with male genitalia conferring masculinity on their bearer and female genitalia conferring femininity. According to the logic of compulsory heterosexuality, a penis makes you a man who should desire and be desired by women, and a vagina makes you a woman who should desire and be desired by men.

Homosexuals simultaneously confound and are confounded by this cultural logic. For example, male homosexuals are socialized in some arenas as masculine subjects because of their genitalia. In others, they are socialized as feminine subjects because of the implicit cultural logic that associates male erotic object choice with femininity. According to McNeal, because they experience dual gender socialization, homosexual men are likely to have "internalized representations of both masculinity *and* femininity, which, in the U.S. social field, are incompatible and conflicting" (351). McNeal points out that this dual socialization is further complicated because "femininity has been culturally construed as the inferior subject position" in a gendered society. Thus, gay men are seen as "betray[ing] the sacred brotherhood" through their "despicable effeminacy" (McNeal 351).

Thus, the stigma imposed upon and internalized by male homosexuals is often twofold. First, they are stigmatized because they do not conform to the powerful

cultural ideals that link true masculinity to sexual activity with women. Second, they are stigmatized because they not only reject a female erotic object choice but also choose a male one, implicitly assuming aspects of the inferior feminine subject position. Therefore, male homosexuals are at once masculine and feminine, a disruption of the logic of compulsory heterosexuality that naturalizes the categories of masculinity and femininity in terms of genitalia and sexual behavior. Drag performance can confuse the logic of compulsory heterosexuality, but as I will discuss below, it can also reinforce certain aspects of a logic that marks the female subject as inferior.

Drag queens represent a particularly visible subversion of dominant cultural assumptions about gender, for they publicly and flamboyantly embrace the stigma that compulsory heterosexuality attaches to male homosexuals. In the context of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which saw an increase in homosexual visibility and the first rumblings of the organized gay rights movement, gay male drag performances affirmed and celebrated the existence of an explicitly gay subject. While drag performance is certainly a liberatory practice when viewed as a subversive act undertaken by gay men to confound dominant cultural ideas about gender and sexuality, a purely positive view of the practice elides discussion of the complicated relationship between drag queens and femininity.

Drag performance offers an arena for homosexual men to embrace the stigma of femininity as positive, but it can also reify the very logic that subjugates the female subject position as inferior to the male. As McNeal writes, it is important not to “foreclose upon any final interpretation of drag because in many ways it re-

instantiates the hegemonic system of binary gender and buttresses the status quo as much as it subverts it” (360). McNeal’s statement refers to drag shows he witnessed from 1994 to 1997, but his point is not a recent one. Newton’s ethnography revealed a similar process in the drag shows of the late 1960s, the time when Ludlam was just beginning his artistic career. To fully comprehend how this drag left hegemonic gender and cultural norms unchallenged, one must first understand the performative realities of the drag world then: what performers said, what they did, and, perhaps most tellingly of all, what they did not.

Conducting ethnographic work with drag queens from 1965 to 1966, Newton became familiar with many styles of drag performance. While these styles varied from club to club and night to night, she classified them into “four basic types of female impersonation: dancing, singing, glamour, and comedy” (43). Dancing queens were sometimes trained in a specific dance style, but more often than not performed what Newton found to be “by far the most common kind of dance act,” the “strip” (44). Mimicking female exotic dancers, these performers focus on “creating the visual illusion” of feminine physical traits (45). Singing queens perform either live or with a record, with the latter usually implying that the performer will lip-synch rather than actually sing. Comic queens use slapstick and stand-up comedy to entertain their audiences. While sometimes choosing one of these other performance styles to “display their [...] skill,” Glamour queens focus on being as beautiful as possible (46).

Among these four types of drag performance, Newton found that “glamour drag and serious drag are synonymous terms to female impersonators” (49). Dancers,

singers, and comics may be admired for their talents, but at the top of the hierarchy of drag performance styles is glamour drag. Supporting Newton's conclusions with ethnographic work of his own, McNeal finds that "a hierarchy of value is exhibited within the realm of drag which places beauty and glamour at a premium" (355). The ultimate goal of glamour drag, and by extension the ultimate goal of any serious drag performer, is to present the image of a beautiful woman. Success in glamour drag is linked primarily to establishing a convincing visual representation of a very specific type of feminine presence. This idealized vision of womanhood adheres to previously concepts of feminine beauty established by the heterosexual male gaze. As Newton found, this beauty was "the closest approximation, in form and movement, to the mass media images of glamorous women" (43). The drag queens that can most accurately present an image that resembles mainstream female idols are revered as the most serious performers, and "any deviation from that image is treated as incompetence, bad taste, or comic effect" (49).

Newton goes on to enumerate the things that drag performers seemed to find integral to the presentation of glamour drag:

slender body with the appearance of large breasts and wide hips, a youthful face with 'good' bone structure, skin that seems soft but is heavily and dramatically made-up, jewelry (especially earrings), a long haired wig (preferably blond and in a sophisticated style, although many wigs still run to the bee-hive, over-teased look), a gown (preferably low-cut and floor length), and *invariably*, high-heeled shoes. (49)

This set of characteristics indicates the influence of hegemonic and heterosexual ideals of femininity on the serious drag performance. All of the traits mentioned by Newton contribute toward the production of a female impersonation that clings as closely as possible to a hypersexualized femininity shaped by heterosexual male desire. Serious drag queens do not merely perform *as* women; rather, they perform *a vision* of women intimately informed by objectifying heterosexist standards.

The fact that many drag queens claim to perform this idealized femininity better than most women is a point of pride for many female impersonators, a fact that reveals an antagonistic relationship to female subjects. Newton notes, “beating women at the glamour game is a feat valued by all female impersonators” (46). McNeal concurs, outlining “why gay men do drag as women and not as football players, or plumbers, or teachers, or anything else” (359). Seeing this tendency an outgrowth of the stigma of male homosexuals as feminine, McNeal believes that the drag show allows gay men to outwit “one aspect of the cultural model of heterosexuality” by employing the appearance of a sexually attractive female (359). According to this model, “women must attract men through the artful deployment of feminine signifiers” (359). However, in the drag show, it is the (male) drag queen that employs these signifiers more effectively than most women, allowing them to “take control of the feminine domain” (359). Reasserting a dominant male subjectivity through an assumption of signifiers of submissive femininity founded on physical traits, drag queens paradoxically subvert the stigma of feminization through an embrace of the same male-dominant viewpoint that results in their stigmatization. While this external performative gender play does serve to “wrench the sex roles

loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is, genital sex,” it also reifies femininity as an inferior subject position (Newton 103).

Taking a hypersexualized and heterosexual female image as its ideal, serious drag as outlined by Newton and McNeal does nothing to challenge the discourses of sexual objectification that equate things like large breasts and high-heeled shoes with a full and satisfactory expression of femininity. In effect, serious drag queens do not even perform as women, but as the image of the ideal subject of heterosexual male desire. Feminist critic Jill Dolan articulates this point clearly in her essay “Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles?” Discussing drag queen performance, she writes,

spectator and performer conspire to construct a male-identified subject [...] Women are non-existent in drag performance, but woman-as-myth, as a cultural, ideological object, is constructed in an agreed upon exchange between the male performer and the usually male spectator (5-6).

Thus, the socially constructed ideal of “woman” becomes a medium of exchange between male performer and male audience, a process that simultaneously defines femininity in terms based on heterosexual male desire and excludes women from this process of definition.

As mentioned above, this exchange between male performer and male spectator is accomplished through the canny use of external and visual signifiers of femininity. Dancing queens strip like female exotic dancers, using familiar pieces of clothing such as bras and g-strings. Comic queens often do impersonations of iconic women, adapting the body language and vocal patterns of women who society exalts as the

pinnacle of femininity. Glamour queens focus on performing the image of a beautiful woman modeled on ideals that closely correspond to hegemonic heterosexual male desire. In all of these cases, the illusion of femininity is accomplished primarily through the use of visual signs: clothing, makeup, and body language. While the drag performers Newton studied embraced the use of external signifiers of femininity, any sign that a female impersonator had a psychological or personal motive for doing drag was heavily sanctioned. Newton quotes one drag queen saying to another that her drag looked “too much like a real woman. It’s not showy enough. No woman would go on stage looking like that” (51). This quote reveals the ideology of serious drag: not to look like a real woman, but to look like a woman that conforms to social standards that idealize very specific physical qualities.

Newton outlines the drag scene’s system of self-policing and elaborates its specifics. While the highly competitive nature of the drag world meant that dressing rooms were often the stage for vicious putdowns between queens, Newton singled out one particular insult as particularly noteworthy. Any time a queen wore an “item of feminine apparel [...] not related to the necessities of performance,” other queens would refer to that particular performer as “transy” (51). Denoting “deviance,” the epithet was related to transvestites, men who wear women’s clothing in a private or personal context as opposed to a public or professional one (51). According to Newton,

transy drag is wrong because it violates the glamour standard, which is synonymous with professionalism, that is, the right context and motivation for [female] impersonation (performance, making legitimate money) as opposed

to the wrong context and motivation (private life, private compulsion to *be* rather than to *imitate* a woman) (51).

The use of this epithet to demean any performer who seemed to flirt too closely with a psychological identification with the female gender reveals the subtle misogyny at the heart of much drag performance.

In the drag queen communities studied by Newton during the late 1960s, the external trappings of femininity were celebrated, but any indication that a performer was exploring female expression in a private, personal sphere was viewed negatively and policed by other community members. In censuring psychological and emotional exploration of gender transformation, these drag performers reasserted the feminine psyche as an inferior subject position that no man would wish to assume. In doing so, the drag communities Newton studied reified hegemonic conceptions of gender and the unequal power relations found therein. Though the drag show grants homosexual men the opportunity to make light of the stigma that brands them as feminine and to assert their ability to construct their own identities, the ultimate implication is that drag performance is playing at *representing* women, not at *being* women.

While these standards governing the appropriate use of female impersonation shaped drag communities during the years of Newton's fieldwork, it is important to historically situate these attitudes within the larger context of the nascent gay rights movement. Performing the bulk of her ethnography in New York, Chicago, and Kansas City between 1965 and 1966, Newton chronicled pre-Stonewall gay communities that were still shaped by an antagonistic relationship to mainstream heterosexual culture. Over a decade later, in a 1978 preface to a new edition of

Mother Camp, Newton delves into how this relationship to mass culture changed in the post-Stonewall era. In her view, “various cracks appear[ed] in the straight world’s relentless wall of hostility,” and widespread change was “wrought in the gay community by the gay-pride movement” (xi). The early 1970s saw “gay sensibility and even real live drag queens [...] making their way into mass culture,” “a shift from effeminate to masculine styles” within the gay male community, and the rise of Sadism & Masochism as a sexual trend, all events that dramatically reconfigured the gay world that Newton chronicled in her book (xii-xiii). As mainstream society became more familiar with the multiple sexual identities that subverted the male-female dichotomy so often at the heart of late 60s drag performance, it is likely drag queens’ attitudes towards psychological explorations of femininity changed. Yet for all these changes, *Mother Camp* stands as “an invaluable historical document” depicting drag performance “on the edge of historic changes” (xiv). Beginning a theatrical career in the midst of these changes, Ludlam often used drag in a way that resembled the queens studied by Newton, focusing on the visual aspects of femininity. As his career progressed, however, this external gender play gave way to a much deeper exploration of the psychology and emotion of women.

More than Skin-Deep: A New Approach to Character

Living in the midst of these historic changes, Charles Ludlam gained notoriety as a drag performer very early in his professional career. This label was perhaps appropriate for his early performances, given his penchant for imitating famous women of the screen and his fondness for overblown female characters. The

aforementioned *Screen Test* gave Ludlam a chance to show off his imitation of the Norma Desmond character from *Sunset Boulevard*, a role that proved so popular that he would write it into his first play, *Big Hotel*. Subsequent roles, including *Conquest of the Universe* and Bill Vehr's *Whores of Babylon*, found Ludlam reveling in a hysterically heightened female mode, playing the Queen of Mars and the Emerald Empress, respectively.

Fitting in with the early Ridiculous aesthetic, these works offered performers little opportunity to explore psychological identification with characters. Rather, they functioned as loose structures in which actors could engage in madcap play, mixing and remixing cultural signifiers in a chaotic collage. In this respect, Ludlam's early drag performances functioned not unlike that of the drag queens studied by Newton and McNeal. The structure of Ludlam's early plays offered few opportunities to explore a character's emotional depth or psychological motivation. Rather, these performances were concerned with visual signifiers and how they could be used to project a certain image. While the vision of femininity constructed in Ludlam's plays was miles away from those created by the glamour queens discussed above, in both instances the illusion of femininity was constructed primarily through visual, external means.

Bluebeard inaugurated Ludlam's "formal period" and his experiments with "concentric dramatic form," (Samuels 109, 24). After this point, the plotting and characterization found in Ridiculous Theatrical Company plays became more seemingly traditional, or at least less chaotic. Ludlam's newfound love of narrative structure meant clearer dramatic arcs for his plays and the characters within them,

providing Ridiculous actors with an opportunity to explore a deeper psychological identification with the role using techniques grounded in Stanislavsky's system. A comparative analysis of Ludlam's pre-1970 plays with *Bluebeard* and the plays immediately following gives a sense of the shift in the way Ludlam approached character.

The 1966 *Big Hotel* features a cast of some twenty-three characters, including, as already mentioned, God, the Devil, and Santa Claus. Many of these archetypal characters appear only in one scene; others usually have no clear action that connects their scene to any previous events in the play. Ludlam said that the play's basic structure was that "it took place in a hotel— all kinds of crazy things going on in this hotel" (Samuels 14). These "crazy things", including a musical number entitled "Sophisticated Love," repeated suicide attempts by a washed-up dancer named Birdshitskaya, and a "cobra cunt ceremony," happen unprovoked by what has come before (Ludlam 8, 16). Doing away with causal narrative, the play's structure allows characters to respond only to their immediate circumstances, precluding any possibility for a nuanced psychological approach to character. The collage techniques, archetypal characters, and random plotting Ludlam favored in *Big Hotel* also appear in varying degrees in *Conquest of the Universe*, *Turds in Hell*, and *The Grand Tarot*.

Written in 1970 after the failure of *The Grand Tarot*, *Bluebeard* presents a diametrically different dramaturgical approach. Forgoing the chance-based collage techniques Ludlam had previously favored for a sequentially constructed narrative, each scene in the play proceeds directly from the previous one. Using deftly plotted narrative, Ludlam gave his company the opportunity to use a Stanislavskian approach

to character construction, responding not only to the circumstances at hand in any given scene but to the larger arc of the play as well. While many of the characters are still somewhat ridiculous and over-the-top, the structured plot allows their actions to achieve a level of psychological consistency that is much more complex than the characters in earlier Ridiculous Theatrical Company works. Ludlam would continue to explore a more traditional, nearly Realist use of character and plot in *Eunuchs of the Forbidden City* and *Corn*, the two plays he wrote following *Bluebeard*. With the chance to act roles that offered emotional depth and developed over the course of a play, Ludlam gave himself and his company the opportunity to explore an acting style grounded in Stanislavskian techniques.

Given the fact the Ludlam was writing and directing each Ridiculous play, it is not surprising that the best roles usually went to him. Marguerite Gautier, the leading lady of 1973's *Camille*, was one of them. In Ludlam's hands, the character was a sentimental and hilarious courtesan that seemed to dwarf the presence of any scene partner. The first female role he wrote for himself after he began using more traditionally structured plots and characters, Marguerite would become Ludlam's "signature performance" (Kaufman 209). Writing the script over the course of one month in early 1973, Ludlam would later claim that when he finished, "the comic and the tragic converged perfectly" (Samuels 37). Ludlam even subtitled the play "a tearjerker," explicitly signaling his interest in exploring tragic emotion as well as the outrageous humor that had come to characterize his company (Kaufman 190). This humor was often described as camp—a term that Ludlam had a complicated stance toward.

Sometimes embracing it and at others dismissing it as a term critics used to classify something as being exclusively for a homosexual audience, Ludlam nevertheless worked with elements of camp in all of his productions. While a sense of camp pervaded Ludlam's plays, he was unafraid to boldly combine this detached, winking style with other stances towards his material. In fact, the combination of camp humor and psychological realism in *Camille* is in large part the reason for its critical success. In the next section, I give a brief overview of camp's implications for how a performer approaches a role. I then discuss the dramaturgical structure of *Camille* and how it subverted audience expectations by alternating scenes of camp humor with scenes of psychologically based acting.

To Camp or Not to Camp: "A Rigorous Revaluing of Everything"¹⁴

Camp is maddeningly difficult to define precisely, but scholarship in the field suggests a few basic principles that define a camp attitude: irony, theatricality, and humor. Taken together, these principles suggest a certain approach to performing a role, one grounded in a critical distance between character and actor. In *Camille*, Ludlam took drag, a technique traditionally saturated in camp, and mixed it with an approach to character grounded in psychological realism. Structuring the play as a series of camp scenes alternated with moments in which he embodied the emotions of his character truthfully and honestly, Ludlam nimbly moved between emphasizing and erasing the distance between himself and the role. His groundbreaking acting style amazed critics and audiences alike, fueling *Camille*'s long-running success.

The slippery nature of camp has resulted in a wealth of scholarly and critical work on the subject.¹⁵ In 1964, Susan Sontag published *Notes on Camp*, the first major critical essay to discuss camp, although Christopher Isherwood famously had two of his characters attempt a vague explanation of the concept in his 1954 novel *The World in the Evening*. Sontag's essay attempted to define camp in fixed terms through a series of 58 briefly sketched "jottings" (76). Key to Sontag's definition is the idea of camp as a "sensibility," "a way of seeing the world" (277). Ludlam agreed with Sontag that camp was a way of seeing the world, but this was likely the only point about camp on which the two would concur. He was later quoted saying that she "really did a number on camp" with her essay (Samuels 226). Chief among Ludlam's frustrations with Sontag's definition of camp was her insistence that some things have an essential camp quality. Ludlam saw Sontag's list of what she called "items which are part of the canon of camp," (277)—Tiffany lamps, *Swan Lake*, and Aubrey Beardsley drawings are just three of them—as contradicting what he believed to be the chief value of camp: its ability to "turn values upside down" (Samuels 226). In his view, camp was an attitude one could take towards the world or a work of art, an attitude that proposed "a rigorous revaluing of everything" (Samuels 226). For Ludlam, camp was emphatically not in an object but rather in the eye of the beholder, a subject's way of perceiving things rather than an object's essential quality.

Sontag's essay also made a point about camp's social and political implications that would prove controversial, not only to Ludlam but also to numerous scholars who would take up the subject. Writing about the sensibility as a "mode of aestheticism" focused on the "degree of artifice, of stylization" to be found in things,

she asserts that camp emphasizes style over content. She then completes a tenuous logical syllogism: because “to emphasize style is to slight content, [...] it goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized- or at least apolitical” (277). While her assertion may have been somewhat true in 1964, gay tastes became politicized in the context of the gay rights movement of the 1970s. As one author puts it, “camp can be subversive—a means of illustrating those cultural ambiguities and contradictions that oppress us all, gay and straight” (Babuscio 28). As homosexuals fought for recognition and acceptance, anything that could be seen as explicitly affirming a gay subjectivity took on political valences that would not have existed when Sontag wrote the essay. While Sontag’s article may be dated, it nevertheless stands as one of the foundational pieces of writing on camp, inspiring or raising the ire of countless other scholars.

In my overview of the literature inspired by Sontag’s work, I came across scholar Jack Babuscio’s article “Camp and the Gay Sensibility.” While written in reference to film, the article nevertheless provides a useful definition of camp and its implications for performance. More clearly structured than Sontag’s essay, Babuscio’s work discusses camp as the recognition of irony, theatricality, and humor and links these to homosexual experience. In the author’s view, irony is “the subject matter of camp” (20). Camp recognizes irony in “any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its context or association.” The most common incongruity recognized by camp, he continues, “is that of masculine/feminine” (20). Babuscio then lists other incongruities that are often the subject of camp, including “youth/age,” “sacred/profane,” and “high/low status” (20-21). As wide-ranging as

these incongruities may be, Babuscio links the recognition of them all to the “idea of gayness as a moral deviation” (21). Because homosexuality is often conceptualized as deviant in a society founded on heterosexuality, gay people experience a gap between the sexual orientation they have and the one society tells them they should have.

Babuscio sees this experience as the root of camp’s appreciation of irony. Having firsthand knowledge of how experience can be incongruous with social expectation, gay people have a special affinity for perceiving incongruities in other objects and contexts. Camp taste celebrates these often ironic differences between thing and context as one of its key elements.

Camp uses a performative framework to acknowledge these ironies. As Babuscio writes, “to appreciate camp in things or persons is to perceive the notion of life-as-theater, being versus role-playing, reality and appearance” (24). Camp makes explicit the idea that we are all social actors, performing various roles as we go about our daily lives. The idea of theatricality relates to gay experience on an essential level, since homosexuals have an additional layer of social performance impelled on them by the logic of compulsory heterosexuality. Because compulsory heterosexuality underlies American assumptions about gender and sexuality, people are commonly assumed to be straight until proven otherwise. Such an assumption often results in homosexuals taking on another role based on sexuality. Because homophobia and discrimination are not uncommon, many homosexuals play straight in some social contexts to avoid the sanctions that might be imposed if they were to reveal their orientation. In Babuscio’s words, this experience of playing straight “is often productive of a gay sensibility” that recognizes the possible gap between what things

are and what they appear to be (25). As he puts it, “Camp, by focusing on the outward appearance of a role, implies that roles, and, in particular, sex roles, are superficial” (24). Along similar lines, Newton’s ethnography reveals a camp sense of the theatrical as central to traditional drag performance. Discussing the drag queen’s focus on the outward appearance of a feminine sex role, Newton stresses the “*distance*” created “between the actor and the role” (109). The drag performer both creates the illusion of a role and acknowledges that it is nothing more than a performance. In Newton’s view, it is this “double stance toward role, putting on a show while indicating distance (showing that it is a show)” that is “at the heart of drag as camp” (109).

Distance between role and performer is often created through humor that points out the ironic incongruity in the discrepancy between the two. The traditional drag performance outlined by McNeal and Newton features many jokes that break the illusion that the performer is actually female. Newton and Babuscio discuss this humor as integral to a camp sensibility. Babuscio calls humor “the strategy of camp: a means of dealing with a hostile environment, and, in the process, of defining a positive identity” (27). Newton has a similar understanding, writing, “Camp humor is a system of laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying” (109). Rather than despairing at the distance between what they are and what society tells them they are, gay people can use camp humor to lessen the sting of stigma by making light of it.

So, a useful working definition of a camp performance is one that celebrates irony using both theatricality and humor. Drag performance has incongruity at its core,

celebrating the ability of a male performer to play a female role. As outlined by Newton and McNeal, traditional drag performance highlights this distance using humor, embracing the theatrical illusion of femininity while constantly highlighting the fact that the beautiful queen is a man beneath all the makeup. In *Camille*, Ludlam used camp humor to create distance between himself and the role; but he also subverted the expectations of both critics and spectators by frequently trading this knowing distance for moments of sincere emotional engagement.

“The Greatest Taboo is to Experience Female Emotions”¹⁶

The emotional sincerity with which Ludlam approached Marguerite stemmed from his desire to act in drag rather than merely visually impersonate a woman. Considered in light of Ludlam’s proclamation that he was a “Stanislavsky actor par excellence,” such a desire implies a level of emotional exploration utterly foreign to the type of drag performance outlined by Newton (Ludlam in Tomkins 96). By alternating between camp and an acting style rooted in psychological realism, Ludlam primed his audience to view his performance as artificial only to insist in the play’s emotional scenes that they take him seriously as a woman. In doing so, he embraced femininity in a way that other female impersonators would have deemed “transy,” ignoring the system of binary gender so often recapitulated by drag performers. Alternating between campy humor and a deep psychological identification with Marguerite, Ludlam’s performance eschewed the simple gender impersonation practiced by most drag queens for a much more complex approach to acting a female role.

Ludlam's first entrance as Marguerite immediately established the camp tone of *Camille*. After a brief offstage argument with a suitor, Marguerite enters in a long, black gown. This gown would have been unremarkable if not for the plunging neckline from which Ludlam's chest hair "announced itself prominently" (Kaufman 186). The choice to foreground an unmistakably male feature instantly established a different relationship to illusion than the one outlined by Newton and McNeal. By showing his chest hair, Ludlam openly toyed with the physical mask of femininity that was usually the main focus of drag queens, emphasizing the masculine/feminine incongruity at the heart of drag performance.

According to Ludlam biographer David Kaufman, "this daring maneuver was the single most commented-upon feature of the show," and a survey of critical reactions to *Camille* bears this statement out (186). Reviewers invariably mentioned how Ludlam took "very little pains to convince [them] that he [was] a woman," making sure to note his "bulbous nose" and "fake falsetto voice" (Barnes, Lester). If these reviewers were sure to mention Ludlam's intentional failure to create the physical illusion of being female, it was usually only to underscore their amazement at the emotional heights his performance reached. Indeed, the same reviewers would cite Ludlam's performance as "completely convincing" and one that "releases the poetry that had heretofore been locked in banality" (Barnes, Lester). Ludlam's reviewers seem to be in consensus in regards to his performance: despite the fact that he underscored his obviously male appearance by framing his chest hair with a frilly, low-cut dress, he nevertheless succeeded totally in convincing the audience that he was Marguerite Gautier.

In Ludlam's view, pointing out the physical artifice behind his performance was crucial to his goal of portraying Marguerite using psychologically based acting techniques. "I was not trying to kid anyone into thinking I was a woman," he later said.

That's why I deliberately showed the hair on my chest through the open neck of Marguerite's gown in Act I. I was not trying, like the transvestite, to see how completely I could conceal my male identity. Wanting to look like a woman was not the point (Samuels 41).

Ludlam knew that his production of *Camille* had received publicity in great part because of the novelty of a man playing the lead. He was aware that the audience would be highly focused on how much he resembled a woman, which he felt would distract from their engagement with the play as a story. To avoid such a trap, Ludlam chose to acknowledge his maleness at the start of the play, feeling he "had a better chance at playing the role believably if [he] came to terms with the audience as early as possible" (42). By making it irrefutably visible from the start of the performance that he was male, Ludlam effectively ended audience speculation about his success or failure in creating the physical illusion of femininity. By removing the audience's ability to judge his performance using the visual standards favored in traditional drag, Ludlam established his performance as theatrical rather than merely physical. This allowed spectators to concentrate on *how* Ludlam embodied femininity rather than *if* he succeeded in doing so on a strictly physical level. Ludlam felt this would ensure that the audience "understood at the outset" that what they were seeing "had nothing to do with this 'drag queen' bit," in which female physicality was celebrated but

female emotions was ignored. By taking no great pains to physically disguise his male body, Ludlam established himself as an actor playing a woman rather than an impersonator posing as one. Because he chose not to rely on visual evidence to support the illusion that he was Marguerite, he had to convince the audience to see Marguerite as a believable character achieve through acting techniques. At once establishing a camp tone and announcing his intent to act rather than impersonate, Ludlam's entrance as Marguerite hinted at both the silliness and seriousness *Camille* had in store.

The first act opens with Marguerite, having just recovered from an illness, throwing a dinner party attended by several outrageous friends. One of them brings along a young man named Armand Duval, "the man who is more in love with [Marguerite] than any man in Paris" (Ludlam 1989 226). Enjoying themselves immensely, Marguerite and her friends eat, sing, and tell jokes. Eventually, Marguerite requests "something gay" (228). This remark is just one of many jokes catering to the company's core audience, which, at the time of *Camille*'s premiere, was mostly homosexual. Soon everyone is dancing joyously around the room. All the activity soon becomes too much for Marguerite's fragile health, and she collapses to the floor in a fit of coughing. When her guests leave in search of another party, Marguerite is left alone with Armand. She hears his earnest declarations of undying love and is won over, agreeing to move to the country with him.

Act II finds Marguerite living with Armand in a small house outside of Paris, secretly selling her possessions to finance the affair. Her friend, also played by another male actor in drag, comes to visit; the two humorously discuss love, marriage,

and money. The fact that both of these female roles are meant to be played by men presents a very campy contrast, but the lighthearted tone of the scene is quickly scuttled by the friend's exit and the arrival of Armand's father. After convincing Marguerite that she must leave Armand for his own good, he leaves just before Armand enters. Marguerite feigns boredom and says she will return to Paris. Armand is heartbroken. The action then jumps forward in time six months to a party attended by both Marguerite and Armand. The tone of the play returns to camp as the upper crust of Paris society eagerly watches the two ex-lovers confront each other.

Act III consists of only one scene: severely ill, Marguerite lies in bed. Her Butler's offer of his life savings, "enough for a pilgrimage to Lourdes," implies that she is very near death. She gracefully declines the offer, agreeing that "it is a miracle [she] need[s]." Marguerite remains resolute in her belief that there is "only one miracle that can save [her]... Armand's return" (Ludlam 248). Although it comes too late to save Marguerite, this miracle arrives just moments later: Armand arrives unexpectedly. After a brief exchange in which the reunited lovers make plans to marry, Marguerite finally succumbs to tuberculosis. Ludlam played this scene sincerely, forgoing almost all camp joking for a serious and sentimental portrayal of the heroine's death.

The alternation between camp humor and psychological depth set Ludlam's audience up to experience productive cognitive dissonance. Watching him camp, the audience saw a familiar scene: a man dressed up as a woman for laughs, caricaturing a certain type of femininity. When emphasizing a camp tone, Ludlam hewed closely to the type of drag performance outlined by Newton and McNeal. Focusing on the external attributes of a feminine presence, the performance's camp scenes capitalized

on the distance the audience perceived between the performer and Marguerite the character. As he applied humor, Ludlam would slyly commented on femininity from this remove, constantly making the audience aware that he was *performing* femininity from a critical distance.

When Ludlam switched from camp humor to an acting style grounded in a psychological exploration of the character's emotion, the distance between role and actor disappeared. Playing scenes such as Marguerite's dying moment in a realist manner, Ludlam suggested a different relationship to femininity and, in turn, to acting. Suddenly, Ludlam was not removed from femininity but *embodying* it, experiencing all the emotions of a female character. Rejecting the glamorous female ideal and the primarily external gender play central to traditional drag, Ludlam focused on acting a female role. By convincing critics and spectators that he was experiencing the emotions of Marguerite as the play unfolded, Ludlam approached drag as emotional and psychological embodiment rather than external physical impersonation. In the years following *Camille's* premiere, when it was performed constantly as a surefire box-office boost for the company, Ludlam would frequently discuss his approach to playing Marguerite, further illuminating the psychological focus of his acting.

Giving interviews to the various press outlets covering the hit play, Ludlam discussed how belief was central to his success in the role. Insisting "belief is the secret to reality," Ludlam revealed how central a Stanislavskian concept of experiencing the role was to his portrayal of Marguerite (Samuels 41).¹⁷ Saying that

he “had to convince [him]self [he] was beautiful before [he] went on”, he spoke of how this belief would often envelop him totally:

Some nights I got so involved with it that I couldn't understand why the audience was laughing. Sometimes, at the farewell scene with Armand at the end of the play, just before I died in his arms, I became so totally wrapped up in Marguerite that my mascara ran down my cheeks in my own tears (Samuels 42).

Ludlam's empathetic relationship with Marguerite allowed him to feel her pain as she was “knocked down by every peripeteia of the plot” (41). Such a belief allowed him to become deeply involved with the character's experience and emotions, which in turn allowed him to give such a moving and honest performance.

In Ludlam's view, it was this “depth of involvement” that elevated *Camille* beyond the realm of camp parody and made it a groundbreaking experiment with drag (Samuels 45). At the heart of this experiment was a different definition of success than the one used by traditional drag queens. The performative focus of the female impersonators studied by Newton and McNeal was creating illusion based on the elaboration of feminine physical attributes the elaboration of physical illusion. Their feminine appearance was constructed through external signifiers and contrasted with the physical maleness of the impersonator's body. As I have already discussed, these signifiers were usually shaped by heterosexual male desire and, as such, reified hypersexualized notions of ideal femininity. In addition, the drag community's policing of performers who had an “inappropriate” or “personal” reason for wanting to do drag reveals a tacit acceptance of the logic that any man who wants to be a

woman deserves ridicule. By mocking any performer who gave any sign of *feeling* like a woman inside as opposed to wanting to be one only on the surface, traditional drag performers reasserted the traditional male/female binary.

Ludlam's performance proved far more subversive because it constructed femininity not through sign but through action, exploring the emotions of a woman and embodying them in his performance. Ludlam claimed this was "a profoundly feminist" move, one that went against cultural sexism that saw the feminine as an inferior subject position (Samuels 44). Believing that "the greatest taboo is to experience feminine emotions," he saw his performance in *Camille* as a defiant stance against the underlying misogyny of mainstream society. By breaking this great taboo and embracing a psychological exploration of feminine emotions, Ludlam eschewed the primarily external symbolic play of most drag for a personal connection to a female role and its vulnerabilities. Rather than buttress the hegemonic system of binary gender as so much drag performance did, Ludlam took a subversive position. He was both male and not male, as opposed to male pretending to be female.

By switching from a mode of presence in which he acknowledged he was a man to another in which he convincingly embodied female experience, Ludlam wanted to give his audience the experience of "different levels of reality and unreality" (Samuels 45). In the world of the play, he was embodying the emotions of a woman with what he called "intimate psychological truth" (43). In reality, he was a man portraying a woman in a play. As the spectators alternated between being convinced by his performance and remembering that it was merely a show, they were forced to consider how Ludlam's performance could be reconciled with traditionally gendered

expectations of behavior, emotion, and embodiment. Ludlam believed that when his audience saw “a man as a woman feeling what people formerly thought only a woman could feel or do” would show that these emotions were “universal” rather than the exclusive property of either gender (45). This revalued drag as a theatrical technique an actor could use to explore the full spectrum of human experience.

Ludlam’s willingness to discuss his personal identification with the role of Marguerite took on distinct political dimensions when considered in the context of the public sphere. By expressing his personal desire to play the character, a role he had “always wanted to play,” Ludlam fully embraced the stigma of homosexual men as feminized. At the same time, he explicitly expressed his belief that he was not a woman trapped in a man’s body, but was rather able to express the female side he felt was present inside him. He referred to this feminine side as “an alter ego” who was inside him “somewhere, waiting to come out” (Samuels 137). The public acknowledgement of the feminine aspects of his personality underscored Ludlam’s unusual position within the context of dominant gay male culture in New York. By the mid-1970s gay culture was moving towards a more overtly masculine style, as evidenced by the rising popularity of leather and S & M.¹⁸ Ludlam’s resolute embrace of both masculine and feminine nature put him at the forefront of a queer theatre aesthetic, one that celebrated radical gender expression and rejected homosexual ideals rooted in traditional concepts of male and female.

Ludlam's Ridiculous Aesthetic "Research and Development for the Culture at Large"¹⁹

Later in his career, Ludlam would openly align his work with "queer theatre," a term that he came to feel differentiated his work from most other theatre with homosexual content. He felt that the distinction between "gay theatre" and his performances was that the former was "really a political movement to show that gay people can be admirable, responsible members of the community" (Samuels 230). According to Ludlam, much gay theatre was "political theatre that catered to gay people's needs for group reinforcement and self-respect" (230). Ludlam saw the Ridiculous Theatrical Company's work as "political in a different way from gay theatre," and this belief was reflected in Ludlam's stated goal of expanding the Ridiculous's audience beyond the gay community of downtown New York (230). Ludlam was not interested in exploring and reinforcing what it meant to be "gay," a label he felt was "ineffective" in describing the political variation among homosexuals (230). Shunning the in-group focus of gay theatre, Ludlam felt his work had implications for society as a whole. Ludlam was perfectly aware that some homosexuals were fighting for social acceptance by showing that gays could be "normal" according to mainstream standards of behavior: that they are monogamous, that they have the same hopes and dreams as heterosexuals, that "they can be teachers and office workers who are reliable" (231). He felt, however, that "depicting [homosexuals] as dangerous characters would be more interesting," and so he populated his plays with characters that fervently explored alternatives to mainstream social ideals like monogamy, masculinity, and heterosexuality (231). In doing so,

Ludlam asserted a fiercely individual viewpoint that explored the theatricality and possibility of gay life, a task that he saw as furthering the goals of gay activism.

As well as articulating a queer perspective on sex and gender, Ludlam would continue to experiment with non-traditional casting. Blithely casting across gender and sexual orientation, Ludlam also firmly rejected the typecasting so common in American theatre and offered his collaborators and his audiences a chance to stretch themselves. By situating cross-gender casting in a comic frame, Ludlam presented spectators with a familiar sight: an actor flaunting social convention in search of laughs. Contrasting this familiar approach to drag performance with a less familiar one in which actors explored gender transformation using psychology and emotion, Ludlam brought his audience into new theatrical territory, expanding the notion of what realistic acting meant. In Ludlam's plays, an actor didn't have to physically resemble the character being portrayed; he only had to be open to exploring and experiencing the emotions of a character. Ludlam's performance in *Camille* exemplified his approach to drag, showing how a male actor could convincingly portray a female character through the strength of his identification with the role.

With *Camille*'s success rapidly expanding his company's audience, Ludlam's dream of the Ridiculous becoming "America's great popular comic theatre" and "an instrument for social change" was closer to being realized (Samuels 35). The widespread interest and amazement at his performance as Marguerite attracted a more diverse crowd than any Ridiculous show had before. The company's audience grew to include not just the familiar homosexual contingent but people who lived outside the gay ghetto of Greenwich Village. Ludlam preferred this "general audience" to a

strictly gay one because he felt his message “mean[t] more for them, [was] more pertinent to them” (185). As his company’s works began to attract people with a wider range of sexual orientations and political views, Ludlam’s ability to make political points about the larger society increased.

While Ludlam shied away from explicitly referring to his message as political, he did say that his plays had a “subsidiary” political function that emerged from his “natural, liberated nature” (Samuels 230). Because his work usually ignored social norms, especially in regards to gender and sexuality, the audience who witnessed them was forced to consider the ways in which these norms were constructed. In doing so, Ludlam wanted to challenge spectators who were not necessarily accepting of homosexuality. “My work is very much for people who might not approve of the gayness,” he wrote. “I take them over the bumps, make them draw certain conclusions about sexism through parody,” forcing them to “hold sexism up to ridicule” (229). The dramatic structure of *Camille* exemplifies this artistic strategy, one that sought to lead an audience from a familiar experience to unfamiliar conclusions. The camp tone of certain scenes allowed the audience to perceive Ludlam as a man playing a woman. The humor of these scenes kept them at a distance, underscoring Ludlam’s performance as mere role-playing. When using this mode of performance, Ludlam’s acting also fit comfortably within familiar gender categories, a man *playing at* being a woman. When the tone switched to an honest and psychologically grounded exploration of Marguerite’s emotions, one in which, as in psychological realism, the actor identified with the character, the audience became convinced that Ludlam *was* Marguerite through the strength of his acting. Ludlam

was so strong in the role that his performance created a suspension of disbelief that transcended gender. Confronted with a performance in which a man convincingly and movingly embodied female experience, the audience was forced to consider and question their own assumptions about binary views of gender, behavior, and emotion.

Ludlam's use of drag in *Camille* ultimately represented a radical reimagining of the link between gender, the body, and the social structures surrounding these two categories. As opposed to the kind of drag performance outlined by Newton and McNeal, which takes the male/female dichotomy as its primary organizing principle and structures itself around a vision of femininity defined by a heterosexual male gaze, Ludlam used drag to investigate how a performer could be both male and female on a personal, psychological level. His embrace of emotion and psychological motivations typically ascribed to women disrupted the traditional gender dichotomy in a different fashion than most drag performers, allowing him to embody and experience femininity rather than merely creating the visual illusion of doing so. Thus, Ludlam's drag confounded two aspects of compulsory heterosexuality's social logic. First, it challenged the assumed links between genital sex, sexual object choice, and behavior. Secondly, his approach to drag performance challenged the idea that one is either male or female, using psychologically motivated acting to explore the idea that one can embody male and female traits simultaneously. The exploration of the paradoxes involved in psychologically motivated drag performance, put Ludlam's work at the forefront of a queer theatre aesthetic and offered a vision of a world in which gender and sexuality were much more complex and complicated than simple binaries of male/female and gay/straight.

While Ludlam's performance in *Camille* was revolutionary in the way it explored alternatives to a fixed gender binary, he was by no means a lone rebel. In the early 1970s, inspired by the nascent gay liberation movement that arose in the wake of the Stonewall Riots, a few theatrically minded members of the "San Francisco drop-out scene" came together to put on wildly gender-bending revues under the name of the Cockettes (Senelick, *The Changing Room* 419). "Rejecting all the totems of beauty, wholesomeness, and patriotism that had been sold to the American public by the mass media, including drag-show icons of glamour," the Cockettes' drag included both male and female elements, "from beards and mustaches to boldly flaunted tits and cocks" (419). After a disastrous New York engagement in late 1971, the group splintered.²⁰ From these fragments emerged other groups, including the Angels of Light and Hot Peaches, who would continue to explore an alternative to mainstream drag performance modeled on sexist ideals of femininity.²¹

With the arrival of the Reagan years, much of the radicalism that had characterized the 1970s was swallowed up by America's emerging conservative renaissance. Coupled with the rise of AIDS, new conservatism dramatically shifted standards of what was considered to be appropriate subject matter for the arts. While Ludlam was never one to pay particular attention to social norms, there was a general critical sense that his work in drag during this period was not as "outré" as it had been (Senelick, *The Changing Room* 428). Conforming to what one historian refers to as the period's "puritanic distaste for [...] provocation" regarding sex and gender, some critics believed Ludlam's female roles became "gender impersonation," broadly satirical without any immediately apprehensible subversive intent (Senelick, *The Changing*

Room 429-430). Erika Munk, taking stock of drag performance in early 1985, called Ludlam's female characterizations in *Irma Vep* "harmless" and so "enclosed in genre" that they had "no meaning in sexpol [sexual-political] terms" (92). It is true that the general arc of Ludlam's career moved from aggressively experimental performance towards less obtuse and more commercially palatable work. However, I do not think it is fair to compare the political effect of Ludlam's early work with that of his later endeavors. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a radically different sociopolitical climate than the mid-1980s, and to expect an artist's aims to remain unchanged as society reconfigures itself is disingenuous. Ludlam's later work in drag may have appeared to be less overtly confrontational with regards to social norms surrounding gender and sexuality, but to hold this work up to standards set by plays he had written more than a decade earlier is taking a rather simplistic approach to analyzing his career.

Even though some critics viewed Ludlam's late work as less political, it was more popular than ever before. With the premiere of *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde* in 1983 kicking off what would become an unprecedented string of hits for the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Ludlam was presented with opportunities to work in opera, film, and television, bringing him ever closer to mainstream recognition. He began to work outside the company, directing at the Santa Fe Opera, starring in Mark Rappaport's film *Imposters*, and tackling the title role in a Pittsburgh production of *Hedda Gabler*. Ludlam's star was on the rise, and he was becoming known outside of the downtown New York theatrical circles he had traveled in for so long.

Tragically, his meteoric rise to widespread fame was cut short by AIDS, which would take the life of nearly every original male member of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. At the time of his death in May 1987, Ludlam was in the midst of editing a feature-length film and writing a new play about Harry Houdini.²² He reportedly had a notebook filled with titles and snippets of other plays, characteristic of the fertile creative mind that produced at least one new show every year. If, as he believed, “theatre is a way of experimenting with life— a kind of research-and-development for the culture at large,” then with his death American theater lost one of its most brilliant innovators (136). While it is impossible to say what Ludlam would have given us had he not died, we can expect that an artist as fearless and peerless as he would have given us much.

Breaking the Greatest Taboo: My Experience Acting Ludlam

This essay is a written complement to the performance component of my senior thesis, which consists of playing the roles Ludlam wrote for himself in *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.²³ The experience of researching and writing about Ludlam’s approach to drag while having the opportunity to examine this approach in the context of a performance has been invaluable. With the production having closed less than two days ago, realizations and questions are bouncing around my head in much the same way I was jumping from one character to the next during my performance. My insistence on having as much rehearsal time as possible to prepare the production unfortunately means I have had very little time to let these thoughts settle and cohere before the deadline for this essay. Nonetheless, I’d like to end the written portion of

my senior thesis with a discussion of my experience performing a female character in one of Ludlam's plays.

The first time I put on a wig and dress in rehearsal, I spent a good half hour simply walking around the room, trying to discover how to move. The wig made my head heavier, changing the way I held it. The dress tripped me up until I discovered that short, small steps worked best to prevent it from tangling in between my legs. For a while after this first encounter with drag performance, any time I wore these rehearsal costumes to play Lady Enid, her gender was at the forefront of my consciousness. My attention was exterior: am I standing correctly? Is the angle of my chin feminine? Do I look like a woman? In a way, I was approaching drag performance in a manner similar to the subjects in Newton's ethnography, attempting to present the physical appearance and behavior of a woman while still clinging to an idea of myself as fundamentally male. In my early work on Enid, I built a physical score that carried me through each of her scenes, but I still approached that score with my maleness in mind. The appearance of femininity was a goal to be achieved, an impression to be created through specific physical choices. In my mind, I was irrevocably different from Enid, attempting to convincingly move like her.

As the performance's opening night drew nearer and my physical scores for Enid became second nature, I became aware that something had changed in my approach to playing her scenes. No longer was I worried about the angle of my wrists or the curvature of my spine. I had worked with these physical characteristics for so long that they had comfortably become a part of my own physical vocabulary. Instead of focusing on how Enid held her head when she looked at Edgar, I was connected to the

reason she did so: because she loved him. The impression of gender difference between Enid and myself that had made me constantly aware of the physical attributes of my performance had become less important, allowing me to personally identify with the role on an emotional level. These emotions, then, became the chief engine behind my performance. Because I had worked for so long with the Enid's physical vocabulary, the initially foreign experience of moving in a manner traditionally defined as feminine became consonant with my work on the character. I began to see these movements not as Enid's but as my own. As I played Enid's scenes, I noticed that I was adding flourishes to the physical score that had not existed before. Responding in the moment to the text or to my acting partner's movements, I might place a hand on my breast or shift my spine. These physical responses came not from the work I had done in the beginning of the rehearsal process, but from my emotional response to the scene at hand. Because I identified with Enid, I was able to respond using her vocabulary. Whereas at the beginning of the rehearsal process I would have had to think about how a woman might respond to a given stimulus before doing so, by the time the performance came I could do it instantly.

The experience of overcoming my perception of distance between my male body and a female role has helped me to understand Ludlam's views on drag in a way that was not immediately clear from my close reading of his writings. Looking back on the performances that took place only a few days ago, I have the distinct impression that the gender of each role was not something I was aware of while on stage. Early rehearsals were characterized by an explicit focus on the gender of each character as a definitional category: Enid does this because she is female, Nicodemus does that

because he is male. As I spent more time with each role, my perception of distance between my own gender presentation and that of each of my characters disappeared. The specific physical presence of each character became linked less to that character's gender and more to my connection to the role: Enid does this because she is Enid, Nicodemus does that because he is Nicodemus.

Ludlam once called his theater “very, very psychological” because it involved “working with intuition” (Samuels 235). The discovery that my intuition can help me explore female roles as well as male ones has reconfigured the way I think about gender presentation both when working on a role and when going about my daily life. Being able to form a connection with a female role to the point that I could respond in character without batting a mascara-enhanced eyelash has helped me understand how a binary view of gender results in the creation of categories that can truly limit what we allow ourselves to do and feel. While many of Ludlam's scripts might invite an actor to explore this type of connection with a cross-gender role, *Irma Vep* is a particular gift to any performer wishing to understand the performance of gender in an embodied way. Asking an actor to play both male and female roles in quick succession, the play makes clear how gender is a role that can be put on and stripped away in the time of a single, well-choreographed quick-change.

In my work on this essay and the accompanying performance, I have learned many things: how to explore experiences and embodiments that are far from my own, how to give myself permission to do so, how to build and animate a score for a role, and perhaps most practically of all, how to walk in a dress. I am sure other lessons will emerge as I spend more time processing this project, but for now I am confident in

saying that performing in *Irma Vep* and studying Ludlam's work has taught me a great deal about acting, both onstage and off.

APPENDIX



Mark McCloughan playing Lady Enid in *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.



Mark McCloughan playing Lady Enid in *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.

The Program For *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.

**The Mystery of
Irma Vep**

Written by **CHARLES LUDLAM**
Directed by **CLÁUDIA TATINGE NASCIMENTO**
Presented by the Theater Department

Thursday & Friday, April 8 & 9
Saturday, April 10, 2010
Patricelli '92 Theater

Center for the Arts
Wesleyan University
Middletown, Connecticut

WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY

Cast

Lady Enid Hillcrest..... Mark McCloughan
Lord Edgar Hillcrest.....Jaime Maseda
Nicodemus Underwood..... Mark McCloughan
Jane TwisdenJaime Maseda
An Intruder.....Jaime Maseda
Alcazar Mark McCloughan
Pev Amri..... Mark McCloughan
Irma Vep..... ???

Fake guns and herbal cigarettes will be used in the performance.

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for Mark McCloughan's
Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Theater.

Manifesto

Ridiculous Theater, Scourge of Human Folly By Charles Ludlam

Aim: To get beyond nihilism by revaluing combat.

Axioms to a theater for ridicule:

1. You are a living mockery of your own ideals. If not, you have set your ideals too low.
2. The things one takes seriously are one's weaknesses.
3. Just as many people who claim belief in God disprove it with their every act, so too there are those whose every deed, though they say there is no God, is an act of faith.
4. Evolution is a conscious process.
5. Bathos is that which is intended to be sorrowful but because of the extremity of its expression becomes comic. Pathos is that which is meant to be comic but because of the extremity of its expression becomes sorrowful. Some things which seem to be opposites are actually different degrees of the same thing.
6. The comic hero thrives on his vices. The tragic hero is destroyed by his virtue. Moral paradox is the crux of drama.
7. The theater is a humble materialist enterprise which seeks to produce riches of the imagination, not the other way around. The theater is an event not an object. Theater workers need not blush and conceal their desperate struggle to pay the landlords their rents. Theater without the stink of art.

Instructions 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.

Director's Notes

I have been teaching Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* since my first year at Wesleyan. I first saw the play in Brazil and remember the experience as one of the funniest theatre evenings of my life. Directed by Marília Pêra with actors Marco Nanini and Ney Latorraca, *Irma Vep* (the title had to be slightly changed for the Portuguese version...) ran from 1986 to 1997. The Guinness Book of World Records notes that a staggering number of nearly three million spectators saw that production.

My fascination with the play certainly goes beyond its comic potential. For a theatre artist, *Irma Vep* is a golden opportunity for engaging with a highly metatheatrical game that disrupts many assumptions—from binary views of gender to notions of what constitutes high and low art. *Irma Vep* is rife with references to classic Hollywood film and Victorian literature; a number of its lines are lifted from masterpieces such as Joyce's *Ulysses*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and Omar Khayyam's *Ruba'yat*. Ludlam freely appropriated dearly loved films and writings to conceptualize a stage where he could belong, one that was at the same time far from mainstream culture and inevitably connected to it. A groundbreaking artist, Ludlam did not only expand his time's understanding of queer performance: he also greatly contributed to the American theatrical aesthetic as a whole

Finally, *Irma Vep* offers a most fertile playground for the two actors: it demands versatility and stamina, range, creative intelligence, a perfect sense of timing, and knowledge of style. At times in drag, the two make us laugh when they fearlessly embrace the ridiculous. They also move us with the deep emotional commitment they bring to the play's lyrical moments. Each actor performs a truly remarkable array of characters—and yet, in a play that so frankly toys with the spectator's fantasies, the two men are also always and irrevocably performing themselves.

— Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento

The Return of the Repressed: Charles Ludlam and Robin Wood

Gay film critic Robin Wood devised a simple narrative formula (“normality is threatened by the Monster”) in his influential 1979 essay “Introduction to the American Horror Film” in order to explain what he saw as the radical political potential of the horror genre. Under his interpretive framework, “normality” is most typically represented by a heterosexual, monogamous couple at the film’s center, a pair in conflict with some kind of Monster, who for Wood functions as an embodiment of both repressed non-normative sexualities and oppressed social groups. Through thematic processes of doubling, sometimes subtly done and occasionally overt (think *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), these two groups are brought closer together, with interesting and oftentimes ideologically productive results.

I have gone through the trouble of paraphrasing Wood’s argument because it has guided my research for this play and because it is this genre’s subversive political potential that I believe attracted Ludlam. Ludlam borrows extensively from classic horror films and Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, where the Monster is the memory of a dead woman, a woman whom the seemingly naïve new bride plays at being in that film’s most famous sequence, parodied here. In Ludlam, this kind of doubling becomes tripling and sometimes quadrupling: the werewolves, ghosts and mummies that populate the play are played by the same two actors who constitute the play’s heterosexual monogamous pair and male and female servant, roles played by two men, Charles Ludlam and his partner Everett Quinton in the first performances. *The Mystery of Irma Vep* then, can easily be cast in Woodian terms; the difference being that the sometimes heavy-handed critical gestures of Wood are reconfigured here as farce and satire, maneuvers imbued however with the same sort of ideological critique.

--Grace Kredell

Ludlam: “The greatest taboo is to experience female emotions.”

Given his constant struggle to define and refine an aesthetic that was explicitly and resolutely queer, Charles Ludlam is a difficult man to talk about with any sense of certainty. Believe me, I’ve been trying to do it for the last six months. While the written portion of my thesis is (mostly) done, I still feel I could write pages and pages about who Ludlam was and what he stood for without coming anywhere near an easily digestible truth. However, seeing as this is a program note and (thankfully) not another thesis, I’ll try to be brief about who Ludlam was, what he did, and what learning about and performing his work has meant to me.

Beginning his theatrical career in Downtown New York in 1965, Ludlam got in on the ground floor of the Off-Off-Broadway movement. He fell in with a group of collaborators and began exploring a decidedly queer aesthetic. By 1970, he’d had a hit play and was touring Europe with his company. His *Camille*, premiered in 1973, became such a box-office sensation that it was performed constantly until 1980, revived whenever the company was strapped for cash. The 1980s brought Ludlam even more success, with the 1984 premiere of *The Mystery of Irma Vep* capping a string of hits and becoming the artist’s most-heralded success. With his profile rising, Ludlam appeared in featured roles on television and in film, directed operas, and was flooded with offers from Hollywood and Broadway. Standing on the brink of mainstream success, Ludlam would tragically never achieve the widespread recognition he deserved. Like so many other homosexual artists, he was cut down in the prime of his career by the AIDS epidemic. Ludlam died in May 1987, leaving behind a host of unfinished projects.

In the twenty years of his career, Ludlam pioneered an aesthetic that he called Ridiculous. While this is certainly an adept adjective to describe the mix of lewd humor, gender bending, and stylistic range that characterized much of Ludlam’s work, the term also has a very specific philosophical underpinning. Unabashedly queer (as was

almost everyone in his company), Ludlam knew firsthand how ridicule could force people to conform to traditional standards of behavior. In naming his group the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Ludlam acknowledged that their work was tailor-made to be ridiculed. This move freed Ludlam and his collaborators to explore the outer limits of sense, story, and good taste. Ignoring the contemporary theatrical trends of the time, Ludlam stole gleefully from classical theater, old films, novels, opera, television, burlesque, and carnival sideshows, to name just a few of the many sources from which he cobbled together his plays. This slapdash aesthetic placed no limits on creativity or on casting: almost all of Ludlam's plays featured at least one person in drag, and many of the Company's biggest hits featured Ludlam in a leading female role.

A note about Ludlam and drag: while Ludlam believed gender was a role that we all perform, he took a very different approach to playing it than did most drag queens during his time. Maintaining a camp sense of remove from the role they played, these performers usually created the external appearance of femininity but shied away from exploring gender transformation on a psychological level. Ludlam took an opposite strategy, focusing on exploring the emotions of a female character using acting techniques grounded in the tenets of Stanislavskian psychological realism. Rehearsing *Irma Vep*, I've tried to experiment with this level of engagement with a female role. While it's impossible to avoid camp when working on a script as queer as this one, I hope that Ludlam's attitude towards role-playing comes through in the performance. It is an attitude that is once playful and serious, giving actors the freedom to take on any role they wish and explore it fully.

For me, this freedom is central to Ludlam's importance. In his theater, no one was ever passed over for a role because they didn't look the part. It didn't matter who you were, what you looked like, or who you wanted to sleep with. All that mattered was a glorious sense of the theatrical, a sense that a person could be anyone or anything they wanted, tradition be damned. As an actor and a person I find Ludlam's vision of theater and of the world incredibly alluring. Working on *Irma Vep* has given me the opportunity to

imagine a life in which the roles I play are not determined by what I look like or what society tells me I am, but by my impulses, dreams, and desires. Ludlam once called theater “research and development for the culture at large.” If this is true, his work allows us to envision a society where roles, whether they are played on the stage or in daily life, can be mixed, mismatched, and recombined.

I’ve sat here for a long time trying to come up with a pithy and inspiring conclusion to these notes. It rings false to be deadly serious when discussing the work of an artist who sought laughter above all else, so I’ll end this way: working on this play, I’ve learned as much as I’ve laughed. I don’t think I could ask for anything more from a senior thesis project.

—Mark McCloughan

Review: *The Mystery of Irma Vep*
 Originally published on October 4, 1984 in *The New York Times*

CHARLES LUDLAM'S latest Ridiculous Theatrical Company escapade, "The Mystery of Irma Vep," begins at Mandacrest on the moors, in the manner of "Rebecca," then, after wuthering heights of hilarity, it slinks off to Egypt for scenes spliced from "The Mummy's Curse." The evening winds up with a howler, courtesy of "The Wolf Man." Naturally, the entire collage is filtered through the eclectic memory and perfervid imagination of Mr. Ludlam as author, director and star.

Even if this were the usual Ludlam yarn as performed by his resident troupe of zanies, "Irma Vep" would be a romp. What makes it singular is that every one of the myriad characters - men and women, more than 6, less than 12 - is played by Mr. Ludlam and Everett Quinton.

The two actors quick-change costumes, characters and genders, diving in and out of disguises and doors with lightning-flash dexterity. Each actor often barely misses meeting himself on stage, although sometimes offstage voices collide. Behind the scenery, the

cast (and crew) may be in a frenzy, but what we see at 1 Sheridan Square looks effortless. Between them, in performance, Mr. Ludlam and Mr. Quinton turn this self-styled "penny dreadful" into a double tour de force.

Blink your eyes, and the Boy Scoutish bravado of Mr. Quinton's master of the manse has been replaced by his Agnes Moorehead maidservant hiding her jealousy - and biding her time - behind a mask of self-sacrifice. The actor demonstrates here, as he has in other Ridiculous jaunts, that he has a genuine comic talent for pretending to be female.

As for Mr. Ludlam, he shifts from an ominous, one-legged haunter of the heath to the new mistress of Mandacrest. In one slightly offstage, extremely offcenter scene, he simultaneously plays both the heroine and her assailant, changing profiles and voices like a hermaphroditic ventriloquist.

Despite all the dastardy, the playwright has an underlying affection for all his characters, even for the misunderstood vampire. That poor fellow simply cannot help himself and always seems to be on the lookout for a rising full moon. In the Egyptian crypt, the atmosphere turns frighteningly funny. That journey to archeological depths is led by Mr. Ludlam as a guide-guru outfitted with a Peter Sellers accent. Together with Mr. Quinton as an ace Egyptologist, Mr. Ludlam ransacks the past for missing tombs, pronounced "tombas." The imaginary descent of the grave robbers into the tombas is itself a stunt worthy of a fakir.

While the two actors are the entire Ridiculous foreground, the background - scenery artfully designed by Mr. Ludlam - is triggered for trickery, including an animated portrait of the first Lady Hillcrest (the former Irma Vep), a Sphinx, a false-bottomed sarcophagus and not so cryptic hieroglyphics. To keep everything equal, Mr. Quinton designed the ornate costumes, cleverly fashioned for split-second doffing. In all respects, this is a highly polished production.

In common with the play itself, Peter Golub's musical score is a Gothic movie patchwork. At one point, the actors - for the fun of it - take time out from skullduggery to sit before the hearth like twinned club ladies and strum a sweet duet for dulcimers.

The script veers crazily from Bronte to Bronte, borrows a bit of du Maurier and recycles Shakespeare while remaining firmly resident in the land of Ludlamania. Though Mr. Ludlam - in his various guises - has allowed himself a few easy jokes, even a bouquet of wolfsbane could not keep laughter from the door.

–*Mel Gussow*

Production Staff

Director.....Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento
 Scenic Designer Marcela Oteiza
 Costume Designer Leslie Weinberg
 Props Designer Marcela Oteiza
 Lighting Designer.....Henry Thornhill '11
 Lighting Designer AdvisorJohn Carr
 Sound Designer Cheryl Tan '11
 Dramaturge Grace Kredell '10
 Stage Manager..... Marlene Sim '11
 Assistant Stage Manager Sarah Wolfe '11
 Assistant Scene Painter April Trovillion '10
 Properties MasterBen Smolen '10
 Properties Assistants Mikhail Firer '13, Eli Timm '13
 Production ManagerJohn Carr
 Costume Shop ManagerChristian Milik
 Costume Assistant.....John deBoer
 Master Carpenter.....Charlie Carroll
 Master Electrician Suzanne Sadler
 Electricians..... Chris Correa '10, Benjamin Vigus '11
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Dylan Marron '10
 Anthony Smith '11
 Set and Properties CrewChris Correa '10

..... William Hasty '10
..... Josh Margolin '11
..... Benjamin Vigus '11
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Delia Silva, Linda Wingerter, Yale Repertory Costume Collection

NOTES

¹ Ludlam's manifesto, "Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly, urged practitioners of Ridiculous theatre to "Show how paradoxes arrest the mind." Other beliefs enshrined in the document include "Moral paradox is the crux of drama" and "the things one takes seriously are one's weaknesses" (Ludlam vii).

² This title is taken from Warren Allen Smith's article "Gay in the 1960s- the Time Was Ripe for Revolution," published in *The Villager* on June 18, 2003.

³ Criticism of Kinsey's methodology focused primarily on his sampling protocol. For a more in-depth discussion, see Cochran, et al and Wallis in the *Journal of the American Statistical Association*.

⁴ For a useful account of the first incarnation of the Society, see James T. Sears' *Behind the Mask of the Mattachine*.

⁵ For a short overview of the sexual realities of gay New York in the 1960s, see Warren Allen Smith's article "Gay in the 1960s". Kaufman's *Ridiculous!: The Theatrical Life and Times of Charles Ludlam* is shot through with anecdotes about Ludlam's sexual proclivities. Edmund White also entertainingly chronicles the New York scene in his memoirs *City Boy* and *My Lives*. Finally, for a scathing satirical look at gay sexual excess in New York, I recommend Larry Kramer's seminal *Faggots*, which, like any good satire, is ridiculous while containing more than a little bit of truth.

⁶ David Carter's *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* explicates the oppressive nature of police surveillance and raids in New York City before the stonewall riots.

⁷ Again, see Carter's *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* for a detailed and compelling account of the events of the riots as well as their immediate and long-term aftermath.

⁸ Amy Dempsey's *Art in the Modern Era* provides useful introductions to these and other major artistic trends of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

⁹ Ridiculous biographer David Kaufman attribute this quote to Yvette Hawkins, a friend of John Vaccaro's (51).

¹⁰ John Cage, who used randomness and chance in his compositional structures, heavily influenced Ludlam's experiments with plot and collage. Ludlam explicitly acknowledges this debt in his 1975 *New Yorker* profile.

¹¹ This quote is taken from a conversation about Marguerite that takes place in the second act of *Camille* (my emphasis, Ludlam 242)

¹² Ludlam played female leads in *Camille*, *Galas*, and *Salammbô*. These pieces premiered in 1973, 1983, and 1985, respectively.

¹³ For an in-depth introduction to the historical evolution of female impersonation in the theatre, see Roger Baker's *Drag: A History of Female Impersonation in the Performing Arts* and Lawrence Senelick's *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag, and Theatre*.

¹⁴ This quote is taken from Steven Samuels' *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly* (226)

¹⁵ For a useful introduction to camp and the scholarly work it has inspired, see *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality* and *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. The second of these volumes includes a staggering 50-page secondary bibliography that references scholarship on camp and related topics from 1869 to 1997.

¹⁶ This quote is taken from Steven Samuels' *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly* (44).

¹⁷ Scholar Sharon Marie Carnicke illuminates how Stanislavsky's system was comprised of "specific techniques that help actors develop a state of mind and body that encourages 'experiencing'" (18). She defines this state as "essentially dynamic and improvisatory," allowing the actor to exist "fully within the immediate moment" and convey psychophysical truth through a combination of physical and psychological action (17).

¹⁸ Ludlam wrote on this subject, calling it "unfortunate". For more on Ludlam's views on the topic, see page 136 in Steven Samuels' *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly*.

¹⁹ This quote is taken from Steven Samuels' *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly* (136).

²⁰ Lawrence Senelick's *The Changing Room* details the withering critical reception that the Cockettes received for their first and only New York engagement. Many celebrities, such as Andy Warhol, Truman Capote, and Gore Vidal, and Angela Lansbury were in attendance when the troupe opened *Tinsel Tarts in a Hot Coma* on 6 November 1971. Many of these celebrities walked out during the performance, disgusted with the slipshod, decidedly amateurish spectacle on display. Senelick attributes this to the professional expectations of New York performance-goers, which the Cockettes would have been unfamiliar with as members of the San Francisco counterculture.

²¹ The Angels of Light, founded by George Harris and his partner Jack, explored a decidedly more pastoral aesthetic than the Cockettes, embracing a hippie lifestyle and making a series of free shows about "nature and beautiful things" (Senelick, *The Changing Room* 420). The Hot Peaches, founded by Jimmy Commedia, borrowed many elements of the Cockettes' style but presented them in a much more professional and polished manner. The troupe would find great success in downtown circles and would continue to produce original work until disbanding in 1979.

²² While the script for Ludlam's project about Houdini was never finished, his two films fared much better. The day he entered the hospital for complications due to AIDS, Ludlam completed a rough edit of *The Sorrows of Dolores*, a feature-length episodic film starring Ludlam's longtime lover Everett Quinton. That night, the film was shown at a private screening for Ludlam's close friends and collaborators. After Ludlam's death, the film, along with a short Ludlam made called *House of Wax*, was not seen in public until 22 February 2010, when the IFC center in New York City showed both films to a sold-out audience. I consider myself incredibly lucky to have been in attendance.

²³ See the Appendix for the program and photographs from this performance.

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