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Interview: Charles Ludlam

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# Interview:

## Charles Ludlam



*Charles Ludlam was an early member of The Play-House of the Ridiculous, which produced his Big Hotel and Conquest of the Universe. A playwright-actor-director, he founded (in 1967) The Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which has performed Caprice, Bluebeard, Camille, Hot Ice, Stage Blood and Der Ring Gott Farblonjet, among others. Charles Ludlam recently has been seen in cabaret performances of The Ventriloquist's Wife with his dummy Walter Ego.*

*This interview was taped by Gautam Dasgupta in March 1978.*



**Gautam Dasgupta:** How would you define the term "Theatre of the Ridiculous"?

**Charles Ludlam:** It has to do with humor and unhinging the pretensions of serious art. It comes out of the dichotomy between academic and expressive art, and the idea of a theatre that re-values things. It takes what is considered worthless and transforms it into high art. The Ridiculous theatre was always a concept of high art that came out of an aesthetic which was so advanced it really couldn't be appreciated. It draws its authority from popular art, an art that doesn't need any justification beyond its power to provide pleasure. Sympathetic response is part of its audience.

Basically for me, and for twentieth-century art, it's always been a problem of uncovering sources; it proceeds by discoveries. In my case it was based on a rigorous re-evaluation of everything. Like yesterday, I was working on a sculpture, and Bill Vehr [an actor in Ludlam's company] stood over me and corrected me every time I did something that was in good taste. It's really an exercise to try to go beyond limitations and taste, which is a very aural, subjective and not a very profound concept for art. And to admit the world in

a way that hasn't been pre-censored. For instance, a handy definition for avant-garde art is that it's in beige-black-white-and-gray. Ridiculous theatre is in color; it's hedonistic. Different artists define it their own way, but basically it's alchemy, it's the transformation of what is in low esteem into the highest form of expression.

GD: Your early academic training in the theatre was rather traditional, wasn't it?

CL: I was a theatre major at Hofstra, and did the classics, staged and acted in them, and the rest.

GD: Was there a disillusionment with the naturalistic (or less-expressive) theatre that led you to the Ridiculous style?

CL: Well, naturalistic theatre is a very recent innovation, a corrective device, and it wasn't the end of anything. It was a fashion to do things naturally. You can't really perform an unnatural act, unless you claim to have supernatural powers. So the whole idea of something being natural becomes a very oppressive concept; it's shallow. Gradually, through training with Stanislavski teachers, I realized that they wanted me to behave in a civilized manner in a room, and not do anything extraordinary. But everything I'm interested in is extraordinary.

GD: The technique of the Ridiculous is, of course, closer to expressionistic theatre or earlier modes of highly stylized theatre.

CL: Yes, and it seems now as if I wrote my way through history. I've written plays that were trying to re-value techniques from various periods. But ultimately, that is an academic approach, and modernism isn't about being academic; it is about being primitive. And becoming primitive isn't easy when you've been over-educated, over-civilized.

Another fact is that all modernism was born in the theatre. Every painting technique, everything we associate with modernism—for instance, Jackson Pollock's "scene-painting" techniques; and Salvador Dali's dreamscapes is like looking at a cyclorama, a barren landscape. Everything about naturalism is, in a sense, a distortion, because they (Zola, *et al.*) were reacting against the theatre of Sarah Bernhardt and others, and it made a mass movement. But finally it became too selective: it set out to prove a point, and proving a point is working from a preconception, and that is academic. Concept and execution is academic; going crazy and committing an atrocity is more modern. In the case of the Ridiculous, it is the only avant-garde movement that is not academic. It is not creating an academy out of former gestures and looks. If you look at today's avant-garde, it has an unmistakable look, and it moves more and more towards a vocabulary. It makes the art respectable, but it doesn't give us anywhere to go.

GD: But isn't it fair to say that within the Ridiculous movement your theatre seems to be more polished, less "mad" than, say, the works of Jack Smith, Jeff Weiss, and John Vaccaro?<sup>2</sup> It is less anarchic.

CL: Well, in the Ridiculous theatre there was a highly competitive feeling among the practitioners, which did not encourage anybody new to do anything extraordinary. And in a way I'm very divorced from the work of the others. Since there's an element of almost demented competition among the various branches of the Ridiculous, which I think is way out of proportion and totally inappropriate, I had basically to go on and create the entire genre myself. As far as my work is concerned, I work in greater continuity—I've written, produced, directed, and acted in more works in the past ten years than the others. We were a group that continued to evolve in techniques, etc., and we built on our foundation. With the others there is the tendency to start everything from scratch, or else the individualism is so great, they can't work with anyone else. That attitude is good for research, that private attitude, but in terms of running a theatre it requires some sacrifice—not merely to exploit the moment, but to develop people, be loyal to them, and that's why our theatre got more polished.

GD: Isn't there a danger of this stylistic refinement itself turning academic?

CL: Sure, but that is a question of the rigor one applies to oneself—you can do the same thing better and better, or do different things. The Japanese playwright Chikamatsu wrote on one theme, but just varied the context over and over and refined it. In my work, the panoramic quality saves it from academicism. It encompasses a much broader world view, and I've been able to bring more material into my work. You see, there are different kinds of artists—innovators, masters, and journeymen—and some people are very good at uncovering little techniques, discovering fine points, while others, like myself, are able to organize vast amounts of material into a very solid body of work.

GD: Since you have drawn from the vast reservoir of dramatic and operatic literature, both in theme [*Hamlet in Stage Blood*, *Camille*, *Bluebeard*, and *Der Ring Gott Farblonjet* (Wagner's *Ring*)] and technique [Jacobean, epic, etc.], what makes these works of the Ridiculous different from, say, lampoon, parody, or satire?

CL: I think it's a question of depth and complexity. *Camille* could be taken as parody, but I perhaps have an ambiguous attitude towards these works in that while they are produced in a certain vein and in my own aesthetics, the thing to do is to examine the Ridiculous as if my work didn't exist, and then see what my work made of it. From my own point of view, there wouldn't be any Ridiculous if it weren't for me. There is a large extent of pain in my kind of Ridiculous. And there is a problem with pain. Aristotle defines ridiculous as the laugh of the ugly that does not give rise to pain. But pain has a lot to do with the significance of the work in our minds. How lightly does it go by? How easy is it to take? To what extent are you asked to suffer, the way you are asked to suffer in opera, or a piano concerto? In my work there is both inner and outer direction. And the depth of involvement changes it from a mere spoof to something that transcends it. *Camille*, on the one hand, *is Camille*, it's a totally legitimate interpretation of the original, and I think the amount of personal anguish, how much of yourself are you going to reveal in it, is what makes it more powerful than just a spoof.



## BLUEBEARD

**GD:** Does this tension between the inner and the outer apply to the other actors of your company? Are roles handed out in the belief that such tensions will make themselves manifest?

**CL:** Yes. Another thing we are not talking about is that the theatre is a madly complex art form. It is not personal, and to make it personal one has to alter it or simplify it to some extent. Some people can control it, but it takes a lot of years. My early plays are more anarchic than any plays produced in this genre; my newer works are more classical. My early works had some classicism in them, but people couldn't perceive it then. It's not that they didn't understand the plays then, but that they didn't or couldn't see what went into creating them. And that's enough to drive anybody crazy: the distance between what you're experiencing while creating it and what the audience feels. Another thing is that today humor is in very low esteem. Today, the whole idea of humorous art is prostituted to such an extent that it can't be taken "seriously," that there can't be "serious humor." Now the whole idea of seriousness is awful to me—it sounds like something imposed from without. It doesn't really imply gravity or profundity; it implies decorum, behaving yourself, and that's what I don't like about it.

GD: So, essentially you're talking about an earthy, scatological, Rabelaisian sensibility.

CL: But what about the unbelievably sublime writing or acting that occurs? If you have shit in the play, and also have sublimity, you have a total panoramic view, like Dante (in his *Inferno*) or Shakespeare. Other artists want to slant the world one way. Now, I love belles-lettres—Ronald Firbank, for instance, a sublime writer, so perfect in creating a small world—but other artists are bigger in a way, they encompass more, they encompass opposites. It's okay to say the plays are scatological, sure, but at the same time they do rise to heights of bliss and sublimity at moments for various reasons. You can't have highs without lows. The thing I'm against is appropriate and inappropriate material in art—it's shallow.

GD: Does it ever bother you to have to rummage through the repository of past art to come up with materials for your plays? This notion of cultural imperialism, of "quotation art" . . .

CL: Picasso said that no artist is a bastard. We all have forebears; we build on history, and rework it at times.

GD: But in the Ridiculous style there does seem to be an infantile regression at work, a pervasive and morbid sense of nostalgia for the movies of old, particularly Maria Montez movies. Could contemporary social and political events be dealt with in this genre?

CL: I don't see why art that has a history and a tradition is regressive. The danger is not so much regression, the danger is the morbid effect of repeating yourself, and that's where modernism—our contemporaries are Johnny-one-notes; each has a look (as in advertising) that he or she works for—comes in. Paintings begin to look alike in most galleries. They cater to people's need for the mass-produced, the reassurance you have when you go to a grocery store and you see a brand name. All of a painter's works today are supposed to look alike. This to me is insane tyranny, it is absolutely sterile, and that is more of a crisis to me than the problem of diversity, or what a friend of mine calls "virtuoso maximalism," the antidote that will supplant minimalism. Also, I don't want the savor of the art taken away, the actual enjoyment and appetite one has for creating something from something else, from something varied.

GD: Let's move back to the Montez films . . .

CL: With Maria Montez, as with pornography or anything held in low esteem, it's really a cultural prejudice, it's not inherently low. Those films were meant for children, and not that that's fine, but they were meant to be comedies and she gave her all. She gave the films a conviction, which was a fabulous quality to impose on something that most people wouldn't care for. The thing those movies have that today's movies don't have is actors sort of winking at you from behind their masks telling you they don't mean it. Not protecting themselves, not afraid to look foolish, not afraid to be thought mad. If actors then could seem to be possessed by their roles, they could justify any kind of theatrics, because the conviction of motivation was there

to fill it out, this bigger form. Not everyone has that much life to fill a bigger form, and those who do become great performers. Now in naturalism there is always the tendency to be less than you are, to be more specific and less, and that was always a terrible danger. It certainly didn't work for me. I am able to do very lively, different roles.

*Martha Moran*



### **DER RING GOTT FARBLONJET**

**GD:** Your productions are indeed comic and lively, but some women find them deliberately caustic and painful in the way their gender is treated on stage.

**CL:** I think that's a misconception. I think women have traditionally been considered sacred, in a way, and that's something that had to go out the window if women were to become people. Women fare very well in my plays—they come out on top—but what people are disturbed by is female impersonation. They don't realize or understand its inner motive. They see something that is humorous; they don't understand what it means to play a woman. There's an incredible cultural taboo against it, particularly in Anglo-American culture. It takes a lot of courage to open yourself up to those feelings. Obviously, in a Ridiculous play everything is ridiculous, but the women in my company feel that they get a fair shake. And it's not so much as being against women as being skeptical of them and not taking a kind of blanket sentimental attitude towards them. Just the idea that women are

equal to men doesn't mean anything; specific women have to be compared to specific men, and even then how can you compare two people. Even the idea of liberating women makes no sense to great women; it only appeals to women who have accepted rather conventional and erroneous ideas about their own existence because of economic factors and the like.

**GD:** Why is it that in New York most of the Ridiculous theatre has been created by homosexuals?

**CL:** Well, it isn't entirely male homosexuality though. Homosexuality is not a sexist phenomenon—so it's not homosexuals against women. And in the theatre there's always been a high percentage of homosexuals because, for one thing, to pursue a life in the theatre it's better not to have a family. Gay people have always found a refuge in the arts, and the Ridiculous theatre is notable for admitting it. The people in it—and it is a very sophisticated theatre, culturally—never dream of hiding anything about themselves that they feel is honest and true and the best part of themselves. NOTHING is concealed in the Ridiculous.

Also, I think a company that was all male or female would immediately lower the level of artistic consciousness. It would turn into a social club, become political. Second, proselytizing life styles is a Brechtian thing—in the tradition of advertising and propaganda work—which doesn't have anything to do with the absolutely rigorous individualism that goes into our work. I think women are essential in Ridiculous theatre; if they weren't, it would be a partial view of the world.

**GD:** Why did you play the part of Camille and not give it to an actress in the company?

**CL:** I always wanted to play Camille. It had a lot to do with my feelings about love, and the nature of love in one of its highest expressions. Is love, in fact, self-sacrifice, or is there another way of expressing love? In my company we all encourage each other to do the roles we feel we must do. And sometimes people think it's sexism if you're in drag, but that's incredibly shallow.

**GD:** Do you think your plays could be performed by other groups without the overlay of the Ridiculous style?

**CL:** Sure, and they're done all the time, although I've never seen them.

**GD:** Of course, outside of the nature of the Ridiculous aesthetic, what makes your productions so overpowering is the emphasis placed on acting, the performer . . .

**CL:** Yes, that's exactly right. We always review the art of acting. Of the three branches that broke up—John [Vaccaro], Ronnie [Tavel], and I—John went and created a director's theatre, Ronnie a playwright's theatre in that he continues to write, and we created an actor's theatre, an acting troupe. In the long run, you can't get to the roots of conviction in a director's or playwright's point of view that you can get when the actors mean it. It takes years to develop that kind of understanding actors bring to your work, and that is



what finally gives the work a base, a depth. Now of course each actor has his or her own style, but yet it's unified. Roles are constructed, they are not just arbitrarily given out, with careful planning as to what impression the role will create.

**GD:** Is the method of creation collaborative in nature?

**CL:** The script is up to me. I doubt if the process is unconventional, but a lot of groundwork is already taken for granted since we've been together so long. Also, unlike the avant-garde, I don't feel the need to have a body of theory to back up my work. I'm too much in the process of becoming something else all the time to do that. I'm constantly devouring things, so that no one approach ever quite becomes true for me for very long.

*Robert Beers*



## CORN

**GD:** Like the ventriloquist act [*The Ventriloquist's Wife*], another facet of the actor, the mask, another approach to the theatre . . .

**CL:** With Punch and Judy, and now with Walter Ego . . . I'm interested in the mask, what it can do—very objective. I was always interested in puppets, and then at one point it all came together and I knew I was going to turn ventriloquism to a higher and new purpose. It was a breakthrough for me, not the ventriloquism as such, but because it opened the door for something in the theatre that I had hit upon earlier in my work—why certain moments were more Ludlam, more my own. For one thing, it's opened up cinema for me. I had always kept a list of possible movie scenarios with my puppets, and I always saw cinema as a kind of puppetry.

GD: Does the name Walter Ego suggest the ultimate exposé—Ludlam and his alter ego on stage—that you think is a criterion for the Ridiculous theatre?

CL: Right, and also the fact that I recede a bit (the play belongs to Walter) gives me a nice perspective. See, the thing is you don't want to do the same thing forever, but you do. It's just little discoveries that keep you going. I really think of myself as an inventor who invents theatrical pieces. I don't think of myself as writing a play and then arranging a performance. I think my plays will probably become part of a standard repertoire because they were invented *in* the theatre.

GD: For a genre that is so stylized and expressive, your plays are a delight to read outside of the context of performance.

CL: That's because they were born in the theatre. And also because of a sense of narrative. *The Ventriloquist's Wife* is, in a sense, pure theatricality. I was creating a piece for cabaret, and so I analyzed all that was the essence of cabaret entertainment, what made something work. I then realized that these things were essentially variety turns, and so I deliberately created a narrative out of them for maximum effect.

GD: To create a narrative is one thing, but to hang a Ridiculous-styled production on the scaffolding of some other earlier play becomes problematic. Say with *Camille*, your strict adherence to its narrative line makes one wonder if your treatment is deliberately parodic, or is it a new interpretation, or whatever.

CL: I don't think they are parodies actually. There is an *element* of parody, for parody is a way of re-using old things. But in order to do parody right, you have to do it as well as the original. That gives you the authority to make fun of it. Basically, I'm using these materials not to make fun of them, but because I think they are valuable.

GD: But is that serious intention clear in the mere fact of your choosing to do them?

CL: Well, the ambiguity of intention is probably just something in me. I don't know me or my work, and I don't want to know. It's revealed to me in flashes—the Dionysian element, if you will, whatever it is that creates it. It isn't a preconception; I don't set out to prove a theory. *Corn* came close to it, where I set out to make a point about eating food along the way, but the irrational, or better yet the intuitive element, must be the guide for me. You can't make a mistake with intuition. And as one matures artistically, one's instinct improves automatically. My plays are not parodic, but they *are* meant to be funny and humorous. There are perhaps subliminal effects that the plays have. I feel I do set up situations where the audience accepts A, B, and C, and then they are forced to accept D. It's gestalt, and, in a way, I change the culture by the way I force people to think their way through something. They went through the experience and they can't go back.

GD: Is it in that sense of subliminal change that Susan Sontag and Stefan Brecht have claimed that this sort of theatre is political?

CL: Yes, I think it is political, but what is political is perhaps misunderstood. Politics is about spheres of influence, and in that sense it is political. If a man plays *Camille*, for instance, you begin to think it's horrible, but in the end you are either moved or won over. You believe in the character beyond the gender of the actor, and no one who has experienced that can go back. In such cases, this theatre is political in the highest sense of influence. But as far as pushing for political upheaval goes, it's not true to the nature of art. Art is not meant to tear society down, it is meant to enhance it.

GD: Is that why you (and the Ridiculous movement in general) very rarely deal with contemporary social events?

CL: We have dealt with contemporary events, like the play on cryogenics, on euthanasia [*Hot Ice*] . . .

GD: But that's futuristic . . .

John Stern



## CAMILLE

CL: Yeah, but *Camille* is a profoundly feminist work. Drag is something people today are prejudiced against, because women are considered inferior beings. A woman putting on pants, on the other hand, has moved up. So to defiantly do that and say women are worthwhile creatures, and that I'll put my whole soul and being into creating this woman and give her everything I have, including my emotions (and the most taboo thing is to experience feminine emotions), and to take myself seriously in the face of ridicule, that's it. That is the highest turn of the statement. It's different than wanting to make women more like men. It allows audiences to experience the universality of emotion, rather than believe that women are one species and men

another, and what one feels the other never does. Even the women's movement is based on conflict and anger; my *Camille* is synthesis, an altogether different tactic. So you see, we do deal with contemporary phenomenon. The historical thing is a pretext. The *Ring* has to do with power.

GD: Looked at in these terms, even the piece you did for the Paul Taylor Dance Company [*Aphrodisiamania*] seems to break down sex barriers. And also, based as it was on the Italian *commedia*, it seemed a logical direction for you as head of an "acting troupe" to move into.

CL: I've been doing a lot of research on Italian comedy over the years. There are two ways of doing it. You can approach it as a sentimental thing, where you are trying to re-create a sense of what had gone on before, or you use those discoveries in a collision of techniques which create a new thing that means more to us. The thing about the *commedia* is that it is all resolved at the end—marriage is a happy ending, and no one feels that way now. That's one of the problems for modern comedy, to restore harmony at the end when so many values have been toppled down. So asymmetrical and irregular works have to be produced in order even to begin to evoke reality. But I'm more interested in the collisions of aesthetics.

A friend of mine said that the nineteenth century got it right—artists perfected art—while modernism is the history of getting it wrong. All the techniques of modernism—reduction, distortion, and so forth—are lending themselves to the inductive analysis of reality, of getting it wrong. When people describe a style of theatre, they are describing how it isn't like reality basically. They never talk about how it evokes reality, which is something we can't explain. I think my theatre is the most *real*, the most natural, but it isn't *realism*, it isn't *naturalism*. It's evoking reality by showing us what isn't real. If a man can put on make-up, false eyelashes and mascara, all the artifices of being woman, then obviously all those things are not part of being a woman. So something is created in that negative space, and that's where the mystery of reality is evoked. In naturalistic production, and even though I'm sophisticated enough to see what they're doing, I ask myself as an objective Martian looking at it: how much of it is intended? The moment they begin to use theatrical conventions, and there's no escaping that in theatre, I ask myself how much of it do they want me to take as real. Whereas in No theatre so much more is evoked, even to the extent of bringing convincing ghosts on stage. So that's part of theatre convention, when certain issues are settled and agreed upon, and only then can you get to more profound matters.

GD: At this point in the twentieth century, however, it seems that we've become totally immune to the collision of antithetical elements, parodies of conventions, shock, etc. How much more can we take?

CL: I'm talking about the notion of something perfected. See, once the idea of theatrical event and its convention is accepted for what it is and with relish, then everything is open to one. For example, certain women have tried to play *Camille* in modern times and failed because they were asking to be taken seriously. They were asking to be mistaken for the character in an everyday kind of way. So the audience thought they were being tricked. But if it's

played in a manner that does not call for you to be a fool, that it's being created by, for and of the theatre, then they are able to appreciate and accept a much broader amount of material. There is this theory in our century that any particular art form comes more and more into its own, as itself, its true nature. That paint is paint, paint is not a tree. The same is true of theatre, and the more the theatre comes to this self-realization of itself, the higher it becomes and the freer the subject matter. A political theatre can't do any topic because it hasn't come to terms with what theatre is. That's where the confusion arises—is it political or not, is it true or not? It doesn't interest me if it's true or not, it is just there. Even my ideas, I just try them on for size, to see if they work or not. Also, I don't care whether they're aesthetic or artistic because anything aesthetic or artistic is true only in so far as we've seen it before and have come to recognize it that way. But if we've never seen it that way before, it's only then that it gets to be interesting. When standards and values are no longer applicable.

GD: Wouldn't that be difficult to sustain in theatrical production?

CL: Yes, and one of my recent crises is that all my earlier works were based on an impossible conception to be fulfilled, and in the failure we found the aesthetic margin. How could it not be perfect? The end of that for me was Wagner's *Ring*, where I chose something impossible to do in one evening and succeeded. So now that aesthetic of failure cannot operate for me any more. Whereas in the earlier *Turds in Hell*, the concept was to synthesize *Satyricon*—and three other plots to evoke actual demons and to stage a black mass—and it couldn't be done. The resulting mess and debris was the work of art.

I was always good at creating extremely original material by failing. Once you reach a point of succeeding, there is a danger because you realize you have become simply perfect, merely perfect. No progress anymore, and that's the frontier of consciousness. For me right now my works can no longer be destruct art, an art of failing. So then I realized I could go on expanding endlessly. My work pulsates that way—from expansiveness, epic-like, panorama to concentric, precise work. And now I'm on to a new phase. The adventure of creating a work in the aspect that has to be foremost—and that's the scary and the exciting part. The irrational and one's right to madness, that's the key. There has to be an element of danger, of risk, for the art to advance.

GD: You see theatre as therapeutic, don't you?

CL: It may be the illness . . . Ha! Ha!



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