



# THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP

**BY CHARLES LUDLAM**

*Directed by Sean Graney*

*November 12 - December 13, 2009*

*at Court Theatre*

**-STUDY GUIDE-**

## ABOUT THE PLAY

### CHARACTERS

---

**Jane Twisden**, female servant at Mandacrest, an estate near Hampstead Heath in London owned by Lord Edgar Hillcrest

**Nicodemus Underwood**, male servant at Mandacrest

**Lady Enid Hillcrest**, Lord Edgar Hillcrest's second wife

**Lord Edgar Hillcrest**, lord of Mandacrest, married to Lady Enid Hillcrest and formerly married to Lady Irma

**Alcazar**, Lord Edgar's guide to Egypt

**Irma Vep**, Lord Edgar's first wife

### STORY

---

*The Mystery of Irma Vep* is a "penny dreadful," a comedy that borrows from Victorian melodrama, Doyleian mystery, German expressionist film, Universal monster movies, and innumerable classical sources to tell the sordid tale of the Mandercrest Estate, where Lady Enid is haunted by the vengeful spirit of her new husband Lord Edgar's former wife, Lady Irma Vep. The servants Nicodemus Underwood and Jane Twisden initiate Lady Enid into the regrettable past of Irma Vep, her and Edgar's dead son Victor, and a mysterious killer wolf that roams the moors. The play includes references to (and appearances by) vampires, ghosts, mummies and werewolves; according to Ludlam, the "slant was actually to take things very seriously, especially focusing on those things held in low esteem by society and revaluing them, giving them new meaning, new worth, by changing their context". All characters in the play are performed by two actors who must not only stay aware of which character they're portraying at every moment, but must execute impossible costume changes within a matter of seconds.

*The Mystery of Irma Vep* was first produced by Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, opening off-off-Broadway in New York City's Greenwich Village in September

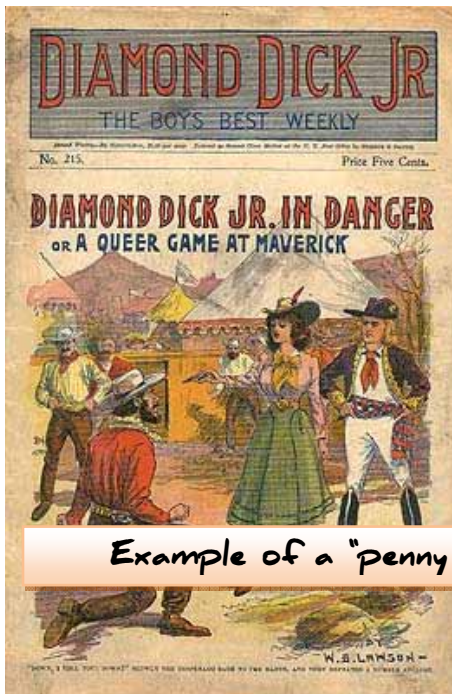


1984 and closing in April 1986. It starred Ludlam as Lady Enid, the new mistress of the manor, and a butler, and Everett Quinton as Lord Edgar Hillcrest, the master of the manor, and the housekeeper (among other characters). The "Cast and Crew" won a Special Drama Desk Award. Ludlam and Quinton won the 1985 Obie Award for Ensemble Performance. The show was later produced off-Broadway at the Westside Theatre from September 1998 through July 1999, with Quinton and Stephen DeRosa. The production won the 1999 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Revival, along with Outer Critics Circle Award nominations for Outstanding Revival of a Play, Outstanding Lighting Design (John Lee Beatty), and Outstanding Costume Design (William Ivey Long). In 1991, *Irma Vep* was the most produced play in the United States, and in 2003, it became the longest-running play ever produced in Brazil.

## THE "PENNY DREADFUL"

A "penny dreadful" was a type of British fiction publication in the nineteenth century that usually featured lurid serial stories appearing in parts over a number of weeks, each part costing a penny. The term, however, soon came to encompass a variety of publications that featured cheap sensational fiction, such as story papers and booklet "libraries." The penny dreadfuls were printed on cheap pulp paper and were aimed primarily at working class adolescents

These serials started in the 1830s, originally as a cheaper alternative to mainstream fictional part-works, such as those by Charles Dickens (which cost a shilling (twelve pennies)), for working class adults, but by the 1850s the serial stories were aimed exclusively at teenagers. The stories themselves were reprints or sometimes rewrites of Gothic thrillers such as *The Monk* or *The Castle of Otranto*, as well as new stories about famous criminals. Some of the most famous of these penny part stories were *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (which introduced Sweeney Todd), *The Mysteries of London* (inspired by the French serial, *The Mysteries of Paris*) and *Varney the Vampire*.



Example of a "penny dreadful" in print

Working class boys who could not afford a penny a week often formed clubs that would share the cost, passing the flimsy booklets from reader to reader. Other enterprising young people would collect a number of consecutive parts and then rent the volume out to friends.

In 1866, *Boys of England* was introduced as a new type of publication, an eight-page magazine that featured serial stories as well as articles and shorts of interests. It was printed on the same cheap paper, though sporting a larger format than the penny parts.

Numerous competitors quickly followed, with such titles as *Boy's Leisure Hour*, *Boys Standard*, *Young Men of Great Britain*, etc. As the price and quality of fiction was the same, these also fell under the definition of penny dreadfuls.

## CAMP, FARCE, DRAG, & 'RIDICULOUS THEATRE'

### CAMP

- 'Camp' is an aesthetic sensibility wherein something is appealing because of its bad taste and ironic value.
- The concept is closely related to kitsch, and campy things are described as being "campy" or "cheesy". When the usage appeared, in 1909, it denoted ostentatious, exaggerated, affected, theatrical, and effeminate behavior, and, by the middle of the 1970s, the definition comprised: banality, artifice, mediocrity, and ostentation so extreme as to have perversely sophisticated appeal.
- Camp films were popularized by filmmakers George and Mike Kuchar, Andy Warhol, and John Waters, including Waters's *Pink Flamingos*, *Hairspray* and *Polyester*.
- Celebrities that are associated with camp personas include drag queens and performers such as Dame Edna, Divine (Glen Milstead), RuPaul, and Liberace.
- Camp is both a critical analysis of and a means of poking fun at something.
- As a performance, camp is meant to be an allusion.
- When someone is being 'campy', it usually means that he or she is intentionally making fun of or manipulating something.
- Although camp is a joke, it also represents a serious analysis undertaken by those who are willing to make fun of themselves to prove a point.

►► From "Notes on 'Camp'" by Susan Sontag, published 1964.

Many things in the world have not been named; and many things, even if they have been named, have never been described. One of these is the sensibility -- unmistakably modern, a variant of sophistication but hardly identical with it -- that goes by the cult name of "Camp."

A sensibility (as distinct from an idea) is one of the hardest things to talk about; but there are special reasons why Camp, in particular, has never been discussed. It is not a natural mode of sensibility, if there be any such. Indeed the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration. And Camp is esoteric -- something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques. Apart from a lazy two-page sketch in Christopher Isherwood's novel *The World in the Evening* (1954), it has hardly broken into print. To talk about Camp is therefore to betray it. If the betrayal can be defended, it will be for the edification it provides, or the dignity of the conflict it resolves. For myself, I plead the goal of self-edification, and the goad of a sharp conflict in my own

### DRAG QUEEN:

- *A drag queen is a person, usually a man, who dresses, and usually acts, like a woman often for the purpose of entertaining or performing.*
- *Although many drag queens are presumed to be gay men or transgender people, there are drag artists of all genders and sexualities who do drag for various reasons.*
- *Generally, drag queens dress in a female gender role, often exaggerating certain characteristics (such as make-up and eyelashes) for comic, dramatic or satirical effect.*
- *The term 'drag queen' originates in Polari, a subset of English slang that was popular in some gay communities in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The verb is to "do drag."*
- *A folk etymology whose acronym basis reveals the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century bias, would make "drag" an abbreviation of "dressed as girl" in description of male transvestitism.*
- *Queen refers to the trait of affected royalty found in many drag characters. It is also related to the archaic word "quean," which was used as a label both for promiscuous women and gay men.*



*Chris Sullivan as Lady Enid and Erik Hellman as Jane in Court Theatre's production of The Mystery of Irma Vep*

sensibility. I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it. That is why I want to talk about it, and why I can. For no one who wholeheartedly shares in a given sensibility can analyze it; he can only, whatever his intention, exhibit it. To name a sensibility, to draw its contours and to recount its history, requires a deep sympathy modified by revulsion.

Though I am speaking about sensibility only -- and about a sensibility that, among other things, converts the serious into the frivolous -- these are grave matters. Most people think of sensibility or taste as the realm of purely subjective preferences, those mysterious attractions, mainly sensual, that have not been brought under the sovereignty of reason. They allow that considerations of taste play a part in their reactions to people and to works of art. But this attitude is naïve. And even worse. To patronize the faculty of taste is to patronize oneself. For taste governs every free -- as opposed to rote -- human response. Nothing is more decisive. There is taste in people, visual taste, taste in emotion - and there is taste in acts, taste in morality. Intelligence, as well, is really a kind of taste: taste in ideas. (One of the facts to be reckoned with is that taste tends to develop very unevenly. It's rare that the same person has good visual taste and good taste in people and taste in ideas.)

Taste has no system and no proofs. But there is something like a logic of taste: the consistent sensibility which underlies and gives rise to a certain taste. A sensibility is almost, but not quite, ineffable. Any sensibility which can be crammed into the mold of a system, or handled with the rough tools of proof, is no longer a sensibility at all. It has hardened into an idea . . .

To snare a sensibility in words, especially one that is alive and powerful, one must be tentative and nimble. The form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility. It's embarrassing to be solemn and treatise-like about Camp. One runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp.

## FARCE

- A farce is a comedy which aims to entertain the audience by means of unlikely, extravagant, and improbable situations, disguise and mistaken identity, verbal humor of varying degrees of sophistication, which may include sexual innuendo and word play, and a fast-paced plot whose speed usually increases, culminating in an ending which often involves an elaborate chase scene.
- Farce is also characterized by physical humor, the use of deliberate absurdity or/of nonsense, and broadly stylized performances.
- Many farces move at a frantic pace toward the climax, in which the initial problem is resolved one way or another, often through a sudden twist of the plot.
- The convention of poetic justice is not always observed: The protagonist may get away with what he or she has been trying to hide at all costs, even if it is a criminal act involving crazy costumes.
- As far as ridiculous, far-fetched situations, quick and witty repartee, and broad physical humor are concerned, farce is widely employed in TV sitcoms, in silent film comedy, and in screwball comedy.

## THEATRE OF THE RIDICULOUS

- "The Theatre of the Ridiculous" is a theatrical genre that began as an American movement in New York in 1965 with the "The Play-House of the Ridiculous" and the spin-off group formed in 1967 "The Ridiculous Theatrical Company"
- The Play-House of the Ridiculous was an underground theater group founded in New York in the mid-1960s, with John Vaccaro as director, originally producing some works written by Ronald Tavel.
- The first official production of the Play-House was *The Life of Lady Godiva*, directed by Vaccaro. Charles Ludlam acted in the play as a last minute replacement.
- Vaccaro then produced *Big Hotel*, written by Ludlam, in an East Village loft in 1967.
- According to David Kaufman, "various features of Ludlam's 28 subsequent works figure prominently in his first play. His predilection for collage - folding in cultural references, both popular and obscure - is especially pronounced. Characters include Mata Hari, Trilby, Svengali and Santa Claus, and Ludlam acknowledged no fewer than 40 sources for *Big Hotel* - everything from ads and Hollywood films to literary classics, textbooks and essays."
- Ludlam wrote a second play for the Play-House, *Conquest of the Universe*, but during production he had a falling-out with Vaccaro. Ludlam left to form his own company, The Ridiculous Theatrical Group.
- Of Vaccaro, Ludlam wrote: "John [Vaccaro] has great instinct and is a brilliant actor. He gave me freedom. He allowed me to flip out all I wanted onstage. He never felt that I was too pasty, corny, mannered, campy. He let me do anything I wanted."

Erik Hellman as Lord Edgar and Chris Sullivan as Lady Enid in Court Theatre's production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep*



## ➤ ALLUSIONS IN THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP

*The Mystery of Irma Vep* is littered with references (or allusions) to other well-known works. Three of them are listed below; see if you can spot others when you see the show!

### HAMLET (play) by William Shakespeare

*BACKGROUND: Universally regarded as the navel of Western drama, deemed by T.S. Eliot an “artistic failure,” it received its first performance sometime around 1602 by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men with Shakespeare starring as the Ghost.*



#### THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP

Lord Edgar: From his fair and unpolluted flesh May violets spring!

Lord Edgar: Enid, there are more things on heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophies!

#### HAMLET

Laertes: Lay her in the earth, And from her fair and unpolluted flesh May violets spring.

Hamlet: There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

### THE MUMMY (film) by Karl Freund

*BACKGROUND: Karl Freund’s 1932 film The Mummy invented a new role for horror star Boris Karloff, who had starred as the monster in Frankenstein the previous year. Inspired by the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb, the film tells the story of Imhotep, an ancient Egyptian priest mummified alive who is accidentally resurrected by archaeologists in modern times. Disguising himself as a modern Egyptian named Ardath Bey, Imhotep uses the Scroll of Toth to help him resurrect the soul of his ancient lover, Princess Ankh-es-en-amon.*

**THE ALLUSION:** Lord Edgar (Erik Hellman) is not only landed gentry but an accomplished Egyptologist and sarcophologist. Accompanied by Alcazar, a suspicious guide, he goes to Cairo to unearth the tomb of Egyptian princess Pev Amri.

Erik Hellman as Lord Edgar in Court Theatre’s production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep*

## GHOSTS (play) by Henrik Ibsen

*BACKGROUND: First performed in 1882, Ghosts is Henrik Ibsen's commentary on nineteenth-century morality, full of secrets, philandering, and madness.*

**THE ALLUSION:** Ludlam begins *Irma Vep* by paraphrasing the first three lines of *Ghosts*. Observe the comparison:

### THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP

Jane: Watch what you're doing! You're soaking wet! Don't track mud in here!

Nicodemus: It's God's good rain, my girl!

Jane: It's the devil's rain, that's what it is!

### GHOSTS

Regina: What do you want? Stay where you are, you're dripping wet!

Engstrand: It's God's good rain, my girl.

Regina: It's the devil's rain, that's what it is!



*Erik Hellman as Jane  
and Chris Sullivan as  
Lady Enid in Court  
Theatre's production  
of The Mystery of  
Irma Vep*



## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

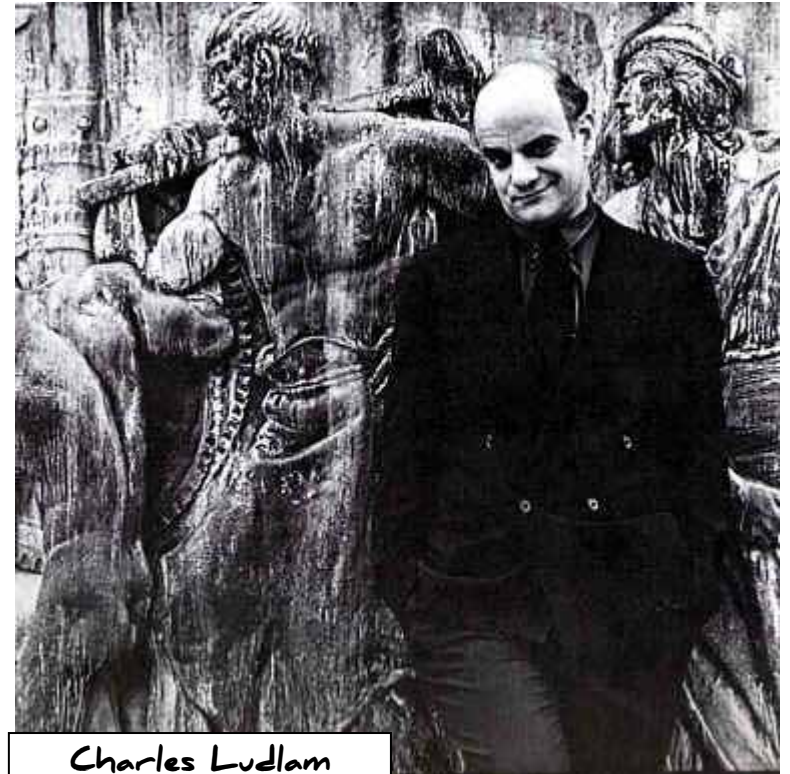
*From Charles Ludlam: Biography by David Kaufman*

When Charles Ludlam died of AIDS in 1987, *The New York Times* proclaimed him “one of the most innovative and prolific artists in the theater avant-garde.” As if to confirm that Ludlam’s twenty-year run had occurred precisely during a time when the avant-garde merged into the mainstream, his obituary appeared on the front page.

Even as he became noticeably more ill, his star was rising ever higher, with the great downtown playwright-performer extending his influence into many different realms. The first few months of 1987 typified the hectic schedule Ludlam has become accustomed to. While his evenings were occupied with an extended run at his Greenwich Village theater of *The Artificial Jungle*, his twenty-ninth and final play, his days were consumed with his latest obsession—writing a dramatic version of the life of Houdini. During this period, he finished shooting *The Big Easy*, a major studio release in which Ludlam portrayed a quirky New Orleans lawyer. Theatrical juggler that he was, he spent any remaining time researching *Titus Andronicus*, which he was slated to direct for the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park, and finally completing the edit on *The Sorrows of Dolores*, an independent film project he had been working on for years. He was also involved in negotiating a new ten-year lease on the Ridiculous Theatrical Company’s home. (The tiny bit of property in Sheridan Square where the theater was located would be renamed Charles Ludlam Lane shortly after his death.) Along with the stress of such a grueling schedule, Ludlam was privately grappling with the knowledge that he had AIDS—a fact he shared only with his longtime lover and protégé, Everett Quinton.

At the time of his death in May of 1987, Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company was twenty years old. A unique and beloved part of New York’s thriving cultural life, his repertory theater had amassed an international following. As the tumultuous revolution of the 1960s continued to inform the passing decades, affection for Ludlam proved much larger and more widespread than even his devotees could have imagined. For two decades, Ludlam wrote, directed, and starred in new plays, maintaining his shifting nucleus of bohemian players through extraordinary circumstances and perennial financial hardships.

Early in his career, Ludlam’s legendary status was heralded by a coterie of celebrated champions... Although many of his fans never saw beyond his highly charged shenanigans and the homosexuality he flaunted onstage, highbrow theater aficionados and tabloid reviewers alike came to admire his plays and to value the intellect behind them. Parting the curtain of Ludlam’s comedy and camp to reveal his more serious intentions, some commentators even compared him to Moliere and Shakespeare. Such comparisons referred not only to Ludlam’s use of classical forms and grand themes, but also to the fact that all three of these dramatists wrote for, acted in, and directed their own troupes—a far more rare phenomenon that many might suppose.



Ludlam's work endures beyond the era of its creator. At least a dozen of his plays are now being performed in a vast number of unexpected places. (In the years following his death, there have been productions everywhere from Akron, Ohio, Anchorage, Alaska, and Ashland, Oregon to Wheat Ridge, Colorado and White River Junction, Vermont—not to mention the more predictable venues such as Atlanta, Washington, DC, Tokyo, and Stockholm.) His impact as a major literary force continues to reverberate to this day. He was not only a pioneer of drag performance who paved its rocky runway into the mainstream, but an inventive playwright who combined classical with modernist styles in influential ways. Indeed, Ludlam is a genius on a par with Ionesco, Genet, Orton, and Coward. Though his work has begun to be assimilated in the international culture, he has yet to be properly recognized and comprehended on the larger scale. He prompts us to ask a sadly familiar question with renewed vigor: Why is it that Americans are so quick to embrace foreign geniuses, while neglecting their all too few, homegrown candidates?



Chris Sullivan as Nicodemus and Erik Hellman as Lord Edgar in Court Theatre's Production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep*

From his roots in the revolutionary sixties to the page-one news of his premature death, Ludlam lived a life that encapsulated—and helped to engender—the impulses and upheavals of his time. In the mid-sixties, when the Beatles still wanted to hold our hand, the twenty-two-year-old Ludlam was perfecting his rendition of Norma Desmond, the character originated by Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*. Long before androgynous superstars such as David Bowie, Michael Jackson, and Ru Paul would commercialize transvestism, Ludlam was busy creating his own eccentric expression of fractured gender roles. Through the satirist's greatest weapon, exaggeration, he was also anticipating—and fostering—the sweeping changes in sexual mores that would permeate and permanently alter our society, as well as the ways in which we perceive one another.

On the stage, Ludlam was forever toying with a theatrical version of the social chaos he inspired in real life, whipping the cosmic void into his own eccentric vision of coherence. (The title of his second play, *Conquest of the Universe*, declares the mandate he divined for himself.) His personal life reflected similar passions

and propensities for danger. Prior to his relatively stable, ten-year relationship with Everett Quinton, Ludlam's numerous liaisons and one-night stands were often highly dramatic affairs. (I fortunately tracked down and interviewed seven of Ludlam's lovers, each of whom was remarkably candid in describing the volatile dynamics of his relationship with him.)

"God, if I hadn't discovered theater early on, I would almost certainly have become a juvenile delinquent," Ludlam told Calvin Tomkins for his lengthy profile in the *New Yorker* in 1976, published when he was only thirty-three. As with most autobiographical statements, Ludlam's remark tells half a truth while suggesting the larger one. For what was his idiosyncratic theater if not a self-perpetuating delinquency molded into art? And what was Ludlam, if not an adult who fiercely preserved his childlike imagination and wonder, and used them to confront the world?

Ludlam's theatrical style was born out of defiance, a fierce reaction to his strict Catholic upbringing. After squabbling with his high school drama coach, he formed his own theater troupe near Greenlawn, Long Island, where he had grown up. Relations with mentors at Hofstra

University, where he received a scholarship and majored in drama, were equally tempestuous and riddled with rebellion. And if Ludlam's subsequent work was famous for plundering the classics in the course of engendering his own fantastic stories, too little has been written about the rather delinquent way he forged his theater company in the first place. Upon graduating from Hofstra, Ludlam moved to New York City and joined a motley crew of actors under the leadership of John Vaccaro, whose group was an offshoot of that gargantuan vineyard of sixties counterculture, Andy Warhol's Factory. Within a year, in 1967, Ludlam had essentially stolen two-thirds of Vaccaro's troupe to create a rival organization, ultimately preempting the parent company. Nor was that all he appropriated: Vaccaro's company had been called the Play-House of the Ridiculous.

"One of the problems with accepting a tag like avant-garde or gay theater or neo-post-infra-realism is that you're a bit like an Indian on a reservation selling trinkets to the tourists," Ludlam told an interviewer for his second feature in the "Arts & Leisure" section of the *Sunday Times*. "You have no real interaction with the culture, and whatever impact you may have had on that culture is nullified. That's why I'll always refuse to be typed as this or that. If people take the trouble to come here more than once, they see that I don't have an ax to grind even though I do have a mission. That mission is to have a theater that can offer possibilities that aren't being explored elsewhere. If you ask me why I've lasted so long, maybe that's the answer. I'm here because I keep coming up with possibilities."

## DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- Considering the many genres and styles being satirized in *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, what is the thematic significance of having only two actors playing all roles in the play?
- What popular TV shows and movies would you consider 'farces', and why?
- In his essay titled "On Irma Vep," Charles Ludlam explains that "the greatest joy a human can know is to bring into existence something or someone that did not exist before. This sense of embarking on a great enterprise and seeing it through to completion is certainly the highest expression of what our society is all about."
  - Before you see the show, do you think that this statement is true? Why or why not? Is it at all hypocritical considering how much Ludlam stole from other artistic works?
  - After you see the show, how do you think this sentiment relates to the overarching themes of the play? Did your opinion of its relative truth (or falsehood) change after seeing the production?
- In his "Manifesto: Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly," Ludlam writes that "the things one takes seriously are one's weaknesses." Do you believe this? Why or why not?