

Just entertainment

The Mystery of Irma Vep opens at Storefront

Storefront Actors Theater will present the Portland premiere of the late Charles Ludlam's farce *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, March 31 through April 22, at the Dolores Winningstad Theatre, Portland Center for the Performing Arts. The performance on April 18 will benefit the Cascade AIDS Project.

Theatre

The Mystery of Irma Vep, A Penny Dreadful, takes place in England at an estate near Hampstead Heath and at various places in Egypt. Its cast of characters — Lady Enid and Lord Edgar, Nicodemus Underwood and Jane Twisden, Alcazar, Pev Amri, and Irma Vep, are all played by two actors. It is a romantic mystery-farce, or perhaps a farcical mystery-romance; at any rate it is shameless and delightful, original but full of wonderful echoes, and great fun for all.

Charles Ludlam, the playwright, was born April 12, 1943, in Floral Park, NY. He died May 28, 1987, at the age of 44, of complications of AIDS.

"In 1984, when he was forty-one years old, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* brought Charles Ludlam surprisingly close to his long-term goal of conquering the universe. Possessor of a personal yet influential vision of modern American stage comedy as a synthesis of "wit, parody, vaudeville farce, melodrama, and satire," he had, since 1967, pursued this vision as a superb actor, inventive director, delightful designer, and — most significantly — prodigious playwright, with a year-round company dedicated exclusively to producing his works. New York's Ridiculous Theatrical Company had had major successes before (*Bluebeard*, *Camille*, *The Ventriloquist's Wife*, and *Reverse Psychology* among them), but even the back-to-back hits *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde* (a tribute to and transfiguration of Ludlam's revered French comedic master, Moliere, and a declaration of independence from aesthetic labels he had found confining since the sixties) and *Galas* (the life of opera singer Maria Callas conceived as a "modern tragedy," with Ludlam himself as the diva), could not prepare the press or the public for *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.

"An astonishing tour-de-force in which two performers — Ludlam and his longtime lover, Everett Quinton — portrayed men, women, and an assortment of monsters in a full-length quick-change act, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* was inspired by the "penny dreadful," that quintessentially Victorian melange of sensationalism and sublime poetry. Ludlam had always ransacked the history of art for the form and content of his

crafty comic engines; this time he introduced a vampire, a werewolf, and an Egyptian mummy into his usual assortment of jokes and puns, trademark stage business like cross-dressing and billowing fog, and literary references ranging from *Jerusalem Delivered* to *Little Eyolf*. An uproarious, thought-provoking paean to love everlasting, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* garnered praise, awards, adoring audiences, and an embarrassment of offers for Ludlam from the world of film, television, opera, and the legitimate stage."

(From "Charles Ludlam, A Brief Life," by Steven Samuels, in *The Complete Plays of Charles Ludlam*, Harper & Row, 1989.)

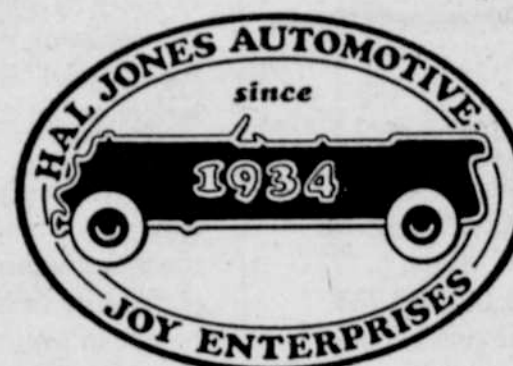
Storefront Theatre's production runs March 31 through April 22 at the Dolores Winningstad Theatre, Portland Center for the Performing Arts. There are low-priced previews March 31, April 1 and April 3. Opening night is Wednesday, April 4. Ticket prices are \$10-18 with discounts available to students, seniors and groups. Reservations can be made by calling 224-4001.

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