



Ludlam, Charles (1943-1987)

by Clarence R. Slavens

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Born April 12, 1943 in Floral Park, Long Island, a son of Joseph William and Marjorie Braun Ludlam, Charles Ludlam became an important innovator in the American theater of the last half of the twentieth century. Inspired by the puppet shows and movies he saw as a child, as well as by his father's humor and his delight in dressing up in costumes, he became involved in school and community theater at a young age and founded the Students' Repertory Theatre in 1961 in Northport, Long Island.

Ludlam graduated from Hofstra University in 1965 before moving to New York City to begin a career as one of the innovators of what became known as "Theatre of the Ridiculous." While at Hofstra, according to Steven Samuels, Ludlam "finally discovered the source of his outrageous, excessive 'difference': he was queer."

Ludlam made his first New York stage appearance in 1966 at the Play-House of the Ridiculous, a group formed by playwright Ronald Tavel and director John Vaccaro. After appearing in two productions there, Ludlam formed his own troupe, the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, which at first performed in Greenwich Village bars and other venues, and began writing his own plays.

In his plays, Ludlam works to decenter the expectations of various cultural groups, including heterosexuals, advocates of high art, and those involved in what he considered to be a sometimes too pretentious *avant garde* theater. To do so, his work employs camp representations of traditional works. For example, *Stage Blood* (1975) is a revision of *Hamlet*; *Bluebeard* (1970) is based on H. G. Wells' *Island of Dr. Moreau*; and *Der Ring Gott Farblonjet* (1977) was inspired by *Finnegan's Wake*.

Ludlam's plays also draw on cultural artifacts that have long attracted a gay camp following, especially classic films. One of his most famous impersonations was his Norma Desmond in John Vaccaro's production of *Screen Test* (1965), his first public drag performance, and later in his own *Big Hotel* (1966).

His plays and performances also depend on many elements of gay camp, including--in addition to drag--a mixture of high and low culture in a single play or performance, the recycling of cultural icons and stereotypes, and a flair for the overdone with stylistic elements taken to an extreme.

Ludlam's plays may seem chaotic when compared even to other forms of *avant garde* theatre; however, his collected prose in *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly* shows a highly developed intellect behind the madness of the plays, which--as he says in his "Manifesto: Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly"--never lose sight of "the seriousness of the theme" despite the "farcical manner" in which they are produced.

Although early in his career he often lived in poverty, Ludlam began to receive acclaim by 1969, when he received the *Village Voice* Obie Award for *The Grand Tarot*. During his career he received several other Obies, as well as awards, fellowships, and grants from the Ford Foundation, the Association of Comedy Artists, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, among others.

Perhaps his most famous role was the title character of his own version of *Camille*, which debuted in 1973, but which was revived numerous times. In this role, Ludlam established himself as a drag performer of uncommon polish and sensitivity. He was so consummate a performer that even though he wore a low-cut dress that exposed his hairy chest the audience soon forgot that he was a man.

In 1975, Ludlam met Everett Quinton, who became his lover and colleague. He joined the company in 1976. The partners starred in the original production of Ludlam's best known play, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* (1984).

By 1991, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, a spoof of Gothic horror films that features cross-dressing, werewolves and other monsters, quick costume changes, actors playing multiple roles in quick succession and sometimes simultaneously, had become one of America's most frequently produced plays.

Ludlam was diagnosed with AIDS late in November of 1986 and died May 28, 1987. Quinton succeeded him as head of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

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