

“It’s a classic tale with creaky doors, a monster in the house—a don’t-go-in-the-cellar kind of story,” playwright Charles Ludlam (1943-1987) writes of *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, but “it’s also about people who are trapped—in old fears, old bitternesses.” The piece may feel at first like a farcical romp through monster tropes and cinematic allusions, but mixed in with all the quick-changes and surprises is also a bit of queer dissent.

Founder of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company (RTC), Ludlam was a constant proponent of ridiculousness, in particular drawing inspiration from *camp* aesthetics. Camp, as he saw it, is about excess, tackiness, perversity, exaggeration, and excavating ideas and objects once thought useless or outdated. Camp is deeply connected to drag and gender play. Camp reveals our own values. And for Ludlam, camp offered space to push boundaries of performance and comedy. Ludlam and longtime lover and artistic collaborator Everett Quinton used the play as their own camp playground, originating the roles in the show’s premiere at RTC in 1984, just three years before Ludlam died of AIDS related complications.

In the early 1980s, when more theaters were starting to produce plays that humanized and normalized same-gender relationships, Ludlam wanted to distinguish his work from his contemporaries. He avoided attempts to portray his queer characters as “remarkable members of society” in favor of exploring the monstrous. He wasn’t interested in the subtleties and nuance of realism, but in the extreme and grotesque of camp. “Maybe depicting [queer characters] as dangerous characters would be more interesting,” he writes, “maybe we’re not as housebroken as those plays want to make it seem.”

A collage of parodies and allusions, *Irma Vep*’s monsters reference a number of classic tales: a line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, a reference to Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, a scene from Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*, allusions to *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Mummy*, and more. The danger of these monstrous characters is not solely in their fangs or claws, but in the meanings these roles carry.

Writing in the height of the AIDS crisis as an HIV+ gay man, Ludlam was surrounded by these images that villainized queer people or used the monstrous as metaphor for the horror of dying from AIDS. Camp aesthetic allowed him to invert, transform, and refashion these narratives into something humorous—because for Ludlam, laughter meant recognition.

From a werewolf who needs to retrain impulses that are harmful to normal society, to a ghostly presence who still has the power to influence and ensnare, Ludlam’s choice of tropes each point to an historically queer-coded character whose fate served as a cautionary tale. Don’t go into the dark. Don’t be seduced by the glamorous figure. Don’t open that closet door. And whatever you do, don’t look in the mirror, because who knows what monster will appear.

So as you enter Ludlam’s *Mystery*, remember danger lurks around every corner, every face is a façade, and nothing is as it seems. And if you hear a cackling laugh echoing in the dark, don’t be afraid to laugh back.

—Finn Lefevre, Production Dramaturg