



THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP



PRESS HIGHLIGHTS



REVIEWS



John Cariani as Lord Edgar Hilcrest and Jeffrey M. Bender as Lady Enid Hilcrest in Charles Ludlam's gothic romance and B-movie spoof "The Mystery of Irma Vep." *Craig Schwartz*

THEATER REVIEW

Quick-change act is the draw in gag-laden 'Irma Vep' spoof

By Jennifer Chung Klam

If your idea of funny includes spoofing on old B movies and gothic melodrama with cross-dressing and high camp, then the Globe has a play for you.

"The Mystery of Irma Vep" has all that plus werewolves, vampires and mummies (oh my!). But the real mystery might be why Charles Ludlam's 1984 spoof-slash-tribute to gothic horror movies and lurid penny dreadfuls keeps getting revived, as it has long since been outdone in humor and tackiness by other works, both in theater and film.

The persistence of "Irma Vep" probably lies in its quick-change acts — since just two actors play all seven characters, each with his own personality quirks, mannerisms and accents. In the Globe production, Jeffrey M. Bender and John Cariani make the breathless and impressive transformations.

Bender is himself a sight gag as the hunchbacked, wooden-legged groundskeeper and the girthy, indelicate lady of the house. At one point, he even has a scene with himself as both mistress and servant. Cariani plays both the discontented housekeeper and the troubled lord of the manor with stylized flair.

The Globe's temporary Arena Stage presents some challenges over a proscenium stage; its more distant exits slow things down a bit, and

some gags are lost on half the audience. Perhaps the setup also prompts director Henry Wishcamper to insert into various scenes a stagehand manipulating props, a questionable breaking of the fourth wall. Wishcamper makes the most of the configuration, though, having his actors romp across the full space — including nearly into the lap of one viewer.

Robin Vest's prop-laden set and Jenny Mannis' costume design add to the silliness, while Jason Bieber's lighting and Paul Peterson's impeccable sound design do the heavy lifting in creating the atmospherics. These elements, especially Peterson's musical landscape, deftly evoke the filmic and pulp sources that "Irma Vep" raids.

The meager plot draws heavily from Daphne du Maurier's "Rebecca," laced with Brontë-sister atmospheric gloominess and B-movie cheesiness.

Lord Edgar has just brought his new bride, Lady Enid, home to his manor in the English countryside. Over the fireplace of the drawing room, a portrait of Edgar's first wife keeps watch. He clearly hasn't gotten over her mysterious death, and she seems to haunt him from beyond the grave. Adding to the mystery, strange creatures lurk about the estate, and both housekeeper Jane and servant Nicodemus harbor secrets of their own.

Will Lady Enid ever solve the mystery of Irma Vep?

DETAILS

"The Mystery of Irma Vep"

When: Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 7 p.m., Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 and 7 p.m., through Sept. 6

Where: The Old Globe's Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium, Balboa Park

Tickets: \$29-\$59

Phone: (619) 23-GLOBE

Online: theoldglobe.org

Who cares? The increasingly senseless story is merely the vehicle for Ludlam's absurdity. There's plenty of hand-on-forehead melodrama, pratfalls and general inanity. Bender and Cariani mug and wink at the audience about certain characters not being on stage at the same time, as mustaches repeatedly fall off and the actors take the wrong exits because "it's quicker that way."

"Irma Vep" is almost certainly funnier for those who have an appreciation for the gothic romances and low-budget horror movies it spoofs. Despite the industriousness of the two actors, the play quickly wears out its sight gags, one-liner groaners and parody shtick, and ends up feeling bloated and tedious.

Jennifer Chung Klam is a San Diego writer.

THEATER REVIEW

Cross-dressing actors lift Globe's overlong 'Irma Vep'

By PAM KRAGEN
pkragen@nctimes.com

What do you get when you combine a stack of old-mystery/thriller books and movies, dozens of costumes and two hard-working actors? The answer is a lot of laughs — in the Old Globe's production of "The Mystery of Irma Vep," a well-produced but overlong comedy now playing at the Copley Auditorium in Balboa Park.

Charles Ludlam's 1984 "Irma Vep" is a campy, over-the-top spoof of the 1940s-'50s genre of mystery films ("Rebecca," "The Mummy," etc.) as well as old Victorian melodramas, Shakespearean tragedies and (in one silent send-up) the board game "Clue." Set at the English estate of Mandacrest in the 1940s, "Irma Vep" is the story of newly married nobles Lord and Lady Hillcrest. Lord Edgar, a famed Egyptologist, is still grieving the death of his first wife, Irma Vep (an anagram for "vampire"), but he has brought home a new bride, Lady Enid, who is met with disdain and suspicion by the castle's steely maid, Jane Twisden, and humpbacked groundskeeper, Nicodemus Underwood. Lady Enid's efforts to uncover the mystery



Jeffrey M. Bender, background, and John Cariani in the Old Globe's "The Mystery of Irma Vep." Photo courtesy of Craig Schwartz

behind Irma's death, as well as deal with the sudden appearance of ghouls, ghosts and werewolves at Mandacrest, take the audience on an often-confusing and too-lengthy 2 1/2-hour journey.

The production's charm is that all of the roles are played

by two superb comic actors — Jeffrey Bender and John Cariani — and they're well-supported by Henry Wishcamper's tongue-in-cheek direction and Jenny Maninis' ridiculous costumes. Bender, last seen in the Globe's Copley in-the-round

space as likable lug Alan in the string-quartet drama "Opus," is hilarious (and seemingly inexhaustible) in the roles of Lady Enid, Nicodemus and several others. He's a gifted physical comedian, with big, expressive eyes and a rubber face, and his burly manliness make him a comically appalling woman.

Adding to the laughs is how Bender's physical size dwarfs that of petite co-star

Cariani, who's a master at dialects, eyebrow arches and surprisingly natural femininity as Jane Twisden (along with Lord Edgar and more). SDSU theater student Chris Wollman fills in the gaps as the silent (and perpetually bored) stage manager, the Third Man.

No doubt there's an army of backstage dressers and prop purveyors to support the duo's lightning-fast costume and wig changes, but everything moves with smooth, unruffled precision. And Robin Vest's special effects-laden set adds to the fun.

Because the play is produced in the round, director Wishcamper amusingly exaggerates the actors' reactions (and then has them repeat their expressions for each section of the audience gallery), and he brings the audience into the action by having the actors climb over and around them in several scenes (in one funny bit set in a tomb of mummies, Lord Edgar advises his assistant not to touch one elderly audience member, lest he "disintegrate").

The two problems with "Irma Vep" have to do with Ludlam's script.

Spoofs by nature are hard to sustain because once you run out of visual gags and

"THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP"

WHEN 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays; 2 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; 7 p.m. Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays; through Sept. 6

WHERE Old Globe at the James S. Copley Auditorium, San Diego Museum of Art, Balboa Park, San Diego

TICKETS \$29-\$59

INFO 619-234-5623
www.oldglobe.org

"can-you-spot the reference" elements, they run out of steam, as this one does about three-quarters through the first act and halfway through the second. If trimmed to 90 minutes, the show would be a firecracker.

Also, the story is so confusing that even the characters make joking reference to its convoluted plot near the end. The action moves to Egypt for no apparent reason (other than to showcase an eye-popping, bare-breasted lady mummy costume), and the big exposition in the finale makes no sense at all.

Still, the show is a fun way to spend an afternoon or evening, especially if you love spoofs and cross-dressing (of the Milton Berle variety). The actors are game and the production values, as always with Globe shows, are high.

Camp, pop culture abound in 'The Mystery of Irma Vep'

BY DIANA SAENGER
Contributor

For 21 years, playwright Charles Ludlam produced plays that borrowed their subjects from other works such as gothic novels, old movies, pop culture and Shakespeare. His forte was comedy, farce and camp. Ludlam's Obie-winning 1984 gothic spoof "The Mystery of Irma Vep," classified as one of the most produced plays in America, runs at The Old Globe's Arena Stage July 31 through Sept. 6.

The story of Lady Enid and her husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife, is a satire of theatrical and film genres including

melodrama, farce and the Alfred Hitchcock film "Rebecca" (1940). Part of the play's lure is that two actors play seven characters. Jeffrey Bender, who recently appeared at The Globe in "Opus," takes on the roles of Lady Enid Hillcrest, Nicodemus, Underwood, Alcazar and Pev Amri. Tony Award-nominated John Cariani will play Lord Edgar



Jeffrey Bender takes on four roles in 'The Mystery of Irma Vep.'

'The Mystery of Irma Vep'

- July 31 – Sept. 6
- The Old Globe's Arena Stage
- San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium
- (619) 234-5623
- www.oldglobe.org

Hillcrest, Jane Twisden and an intruder.

Bender, who has a strong repertoire of physical comedy, recognized the challenge of playing camp and cross-dressing characters.

"You have to be willing to do anything on stage and have fun with it," he said. "I

don't get to do camp that often, but I think physical comedy plays into camp."

In addition to a physical presence, playing a role of the opposite sex requires an actor to psychologically get into their character. Bender began his journey by working on the dialect.

"I knew Lady Enid was going to be more of a prim and proper character, more upper-crust British, so I memorized my lines with a British cockney accent," he said.

Director Henry Wishcamper, artistic director of Katharsis Theater Company, said his two actors are malleable professionals who will portray their many characters with ease and fun. He sees his job more about making sense of the play.

"The stakes of what's going on are extraordinarily high to the point of ridiculousness almost every moment of play," Wishcamper said. "The challenge is to create enough variation so the play doesn't become hysterical all the time. It's a tricky balance between something that is truthful and something that is heightened to the point of being absurd."

Anyone who has seen the incredible quick-change artists on television realizes the extra challenge these actors face on the intimate round Arena Stage that is



'The Mystery of Irma Vep' is a campy farce and one of America's most produced plays. COURTESY PHOTOS

void of typical theater contraptions.

"The set, sound and costume designs are integral to this play to make it fit within the space," Wishcamper said. "Robin Vest, the scenic designer, has down a clever job of collapsing the set down so the quick changes that are the heart and soul of the piece can be achieved in the same amount of time to achieve them on a proscenium stage."

As with many stage productions, it's the costumes that make the play come to life. Wishcamper and Bender agree that costumes by designer Jenny Mannis are really another character in "Irma Vep."

"Jenny re-creates the world of classic Hollywood of the late 1930s and early 1940s with fun costumes," Wishcamper said. "Sound is an

other important character in the play. Paul Peterson includes a wealth of amazing music of old classics, including Bernard Herrmann scores with the sweeping majestic romantic sounds and the crazy campy scores of the old B horror movies."

Thinking about two actors having to step off the stage after one line and re-emerge to utter one line as a different character seems impossible, but is part of the intrigue Bender believes is appealing about "The Mystery of Irma Vep."

"Patrons will enjoy the spectacle of how hard we're working to do the quick costume changes," Bender said. "They'll also like the pure magic of the show. Its horror spoofs and comedic references to plays are spectacular. Playgoers are definitely going for a ride with this play."

SAN DIEGO

Regional Reviews by Bill Eadie

The Mystery of Irma Vep

Old Globe Theatre

Also see Bill's reviews of [Herringbone](#) and [First Wives Club](#)

Charles Ludlam spent most of his theatre career in the avant-garde off-off-Broadway realms of Greenwich Village, where his Ridiculous Theatrical Company put on production after production in which he served as producer, director, writer and star, many times in drag. He broke through to the mainstream with his 1984 spoof of penny dreadfuls, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, a play that *New York Times* theatre critic Frank Rich included among his list of best plays for that year. It was a pretty good season for plays, too—the Tony nominees were Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues*, William Hoffman's *As Is*, David Rabe's *Hurlyburly* and August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (bonus points: can you recall which one won?). But, undoubtedly, Mr. Ludlam's play is produced more often than any of these others.



**John Cariani and
Jeffrey M. Bender**

Now, it's the Old Globe's turn, as the final production of its five-play summer season. And all of the elements are in place for the production to crackle. Maybe with a few more performances under their belts, the company will do so.

Mr. Ludlam's play turns not only on dead-on parodies of old movies of this genre but on the fact that only two actors (originally Mr. Ludlam and his partner, Everett Quinton) play all of the roles. Keeping the play moving involves a number of quick changes, many of which go from male to female characters and back again. In a relatively small proscenium space, such as the Ridiculous Theatre's home, or the Westside Theatre in New York, where Mr. Quinton directed a successful 1998 revival, the actors could dart out a door, do the change, and dart back in, even through another door, in no time.

But the Old Globe is staging this version in its temporary arena space, which has been created out of the nearby San Diego Museum of Art's multipurpose hall. Arena staging means that there are no real doors (Robin Vest's clever set uses half-doors, but the entire space, audience areas included, is part of the action). The actors (John Cariani and Jeffrey M. Bender) have a long way to go to get off-stage, change and get back on again.

Therefore, director Henry Wishcamper cheats: he introduces another character called (again, cleverly) The Third Man (Chris Wollman). Mr. Wollman wears all black and a headset, so it is disconcerting the first time we see him—it appears to be a mistake backstage. But it soon becomes clear that The Third Man is there to provide special effects that might have

been done from behind or under the set in a more traditional staging, as well as to move things on an off when they need to be moved (there is an especially funny bit involving a remote control unit). Mr. Wollman's presence is probably necessary, but it still feels like somehow the two guys onstage weren't really doing it all.

In fact, because the guys onstage are running for their lives whenever they had a costume change the pace of the play lags more than a little. Even so, once they make it onstage, there is fun to be had. To wit: the play is set in Mandacrest, a British country estate, during the time that penny dreadful novels were being turned into films starring the likes of Joan Fontaine. Lady Enid, Lord Edgar's second wife, has come from the city to take up residence, but the staff—a housekeeper named Jane Twisden and a groundskeeper named Nicodemus Underwood—are still pining for their previous mistress, who died under unusual circumstances. The moor surrounding the estate does seem to be possessed, and Lord Edgar spends an inordinate amount of time hunting, looking for one wolf in particular. By (deliberately outlandish) coincidence, Lord Edgar is also an avid Egyptologist, so when an opportunity comes along to invade the tomb of a young woman who may not have been dead when she was buried, he jumps at it.

Of course, the more over the top this silliness gets the better, and on opening night the actors were partway there, with things improving significantly as the story unfolded. Mr. Cariani is particularly effective playing Jane, though he also does well ad-libbing through losing Lord Edgar's moustache more than once. Mr. Bender seems to shine most as Nicodemus, and he and Mr. Cariani manage to crack each other up just enough to keep things spontaneous.

The technical side of things is a big help. Robin Vest's aforementioned set not only furnishes a good deal of humor itself but transforms well from Mandacrest to Egypt and back again (sort of—don't be confused about where you're sitting when you come back from intermission). Jenny Mannis' costumes bring their own visual wit to the proceedings (though, I wondered how "quick change" some of them really were), and Jason Bieber and Paul Peterson contribute highly effective lighting and sound designs.

I'd wait a week to go, if you can (the show runs until September 6). By that time, everyone should have picked up the pace and the result should be depraved delight.

The Old Globe presents *The Mystery of Irma Vep* at the Old Globe Arena Stage at the James S. Copley Auditorium, San Diego Museum of Art, through September 6, 2009. Tickets at (619) 23-GLOBE or [The Old Globe website](#).

The Mystery of Irma Vep. Directed by Henry Wishcamper, with scenic design by Robin Vest, costume design by Jenny Mannis, lighting design by Jason Bieber, and sound design by Paul Peterson. With John Cariani (Jane Twisden, Lord Edgar Hillcrest, and An Intruder), Jeffrey M. Bender (Nicodemus Underwood, Lady Enid Hillcrest, Alcazar, and Pev Amri), and Chris Wollman (The Third Man).

Photo credit: Craig Schwartz

See the [current theatre season schedule for the San Diego area](#).

theater review

The Mystery of Irma Vep: Comedy is campy, ridiculous fun

BY CHARLENE BALDRIDGE

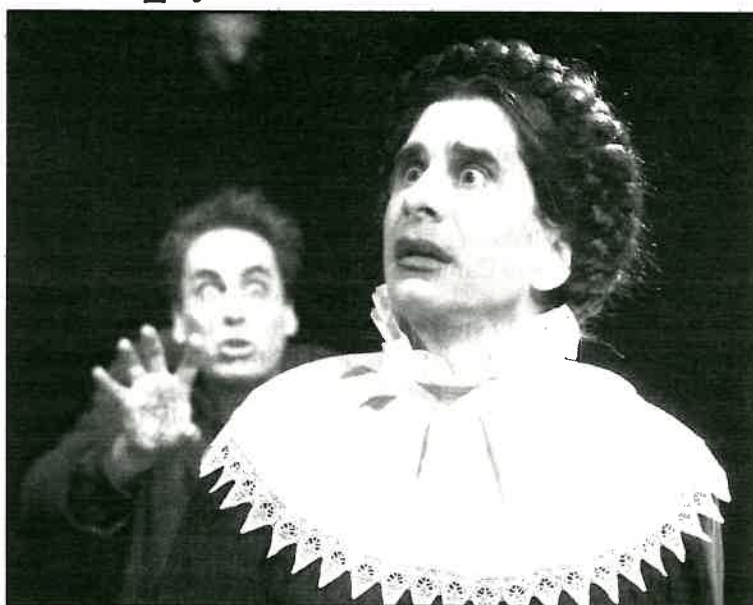
Once upon a time, when Jerry Patch was artistic director at the Old Globe, he instituted a program in which that august institution took a new look at classic plays or more recent fare that in his opinion had not been given a fair shake the first time around. It was a grand idea that resulted in many fine new looks, including the recent production of John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation."

Currently in production and bidding farewell to the Globe's temporary Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art's remodeled Copley Auditorium, is a new look at Charles Ludlam's 1984 comedy "The Mystery of Irma Vep."

The original off-off-Broadway production took place at Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company and starred Ludlam and his longtime partner, actor and costume designer Everett Quinton. Between them, they played all eight characters in the penny dreadful melodrama, a send up of film (largely Alfred Hitchcock's "Rebecca") and theater that embraces such elements as vampires, werewolves, ghosts and the mysteries of Egypt. Irma Vep is an anagram for "vampire." Ludlam once said that their intent was to play the piece, written for two actors, very seriously but in camp style.

In the Old Globe production, which stars Jeffrey M. Bender in the Ludlam roles and John Cariani in the Quinton roles, director Henry Wishcamper places emphasis on the serious component of the original intent, with nary a wink at camp. Granted it is exceptionally intellectual camp and this is the Old Globe. Curiously, with a few bumps and grinds, Wishcamper makes the play's covert sexual innuendo overt.

Lady Enid Hillcrest (Bender)



(Left) Jeffrey M. Bender as "Nicodemus" and John Cariani as "Jane Twisden" in Charles Ludlam's gothic spoof, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, at The Old Globe. (Craig Schwartz/The Old Globe)

"THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP"

"The Mystery of Irma Vep" continues through September 6 at the Old Globe's Arena Stage at James S. Copley Auditorium, San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park. Tickets are \$29-\$59. For more information, call (619) 23-GLOBE or visit www.theoldglobe.org.

has recently wed the widowed Lord Edgar Hillcrest (Cariani) of Mandecrest manor. The lord is landed gentry with an avid interest in Egyptology. In his employ is former governess now housekeeper Jane Twisden (also Bender). Cariani's Jane is a sour spinster with a penchant for elongated n's and m's and a deliciously nasty, nasal twang. One of this production's highlights is a vocal duet accompanied by dulcimer, sung/played by Lady Enid and Jane. Bender's Enid is a great, heavily bosomed, gawping female, hilarious by mere juxtaposition with Cariani's diminutive Sir Edgar, whose moustache keeps slipping and who gets lost continuously in her enormous

décolletage.

Bender also portrays the dim-witted hunchback, Nicodemus, who transforms by the full moon, apparently, into the werewolf held responsible for the deaths of Irma Vep, the former Lady Hillcrest, and her son, Victor.

The wonderment of the play lies in two men making quick changes and vocal adjustments as in quicksilver fashion they exit as one and then instantaneously re-enter as another. In a smaller space, such as the former Cassius Carter Centre Stage, everything would move as "Irma" should, quickly and quicksilver. Here, because of the long distances each actor must gallop, the pace drags despite their amazing skills.

Then there is the matter of camp and its definition. Underlying camp is a secret to which the audience must be privy – that the actors, despite their seriousness, are amused at their own ability to send up and emote all this ridiculous stuff.

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VEP: Irma Vep is an anagram for "vampire"

Jenny Mannis's costumes are exceptionally apt, especially Lady Enid's satin and roses ball gown. Robin Vest's scenic design stretches from sea to shining sea, a bit redolent of the attic in the Globe's recent production of "The Price." The program page declares the play set "between the two wars" – presumably between the two world wars. Paul Peterson's sound design is a romp and a half, riffing between musical depictions of tempests, Hollywood bodice rippers and Egyptian kitsch. Jason Bieber's lighting is also amusing, placing emphasis on the manor's portrait gallery and freezing characters at moments of possible revelation. But as they say, it's all ridiculous and great fun. ♦

Charlene Baldridge is a freelance arts writer who has written for the *La Jolla Village News*, *Performances Magazine*, and *sdtheatrescene.com*. She can be reached at newolderwoman.blogspot.com

'The Mystery of Irma Vep'

Something sinister is afoot at Mandacrest, the English estate owned by Lord Edgar Hillcrest (John Cariani) and his new wife Lady Enid (Jeffrey M. Bender).

For one thing, that portrait of previous wife Irma Vep staring down from the wall is, well, kind of creepy, and Lady Enid wants it removed. The housekeeper, Jane Twisden (Cariani) misses her previous mistress: "I can't bear the thought of her in a grave. She was always so afraid of the dark." Jane has not taken well to Lady Enid.

A wolf seems to haunt the manor, and there's Nicodemus the peg-legged caretaker (Bender), who has an unusual relationship with the full moon.

Are you getting the idea? It's Charles Ludlam's hilarious send-up of Victorian and gothic parlor mysteries, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, playing through Sept. 6 at the Museum of Art's Copley Auditorium. Henry Wishcamper directs.

Bender and Cariani play seven characters between them in this tour de force romp that careens through some of the best-known works in the genre including *Rebecca*, *The Mummy's Curse* and *Wolf Man*. It's all very silly and a whale of a lot of fun.

A jaunt to Egypt in the second act nets Lord Edgar a pristine tomb, complete with mummy (thanks to mysterious local expert Alcazar). Of course, Lord Edgar ships the mummy home as a souvenir, just in time to find not just the wolves getting out of control, but Jane, Lady Enid and Nicodemus as well. Then there's the revelation that Irma Vep is anagrammatic for (wait for it) vampire.

The show's design team should take a bow. Robin Vest's set is terrific – a beautifully appointed English drawing room, with "family portraits" all around, a suit of armor, a "zebra" hide and a stuffed animal. The living room holds a great double-sided settee, a chaise and two intriguing tables with knickknacks.

Likewise, Jenny Mannis'

costumes, Jason Bieber's lighting and Paul Peterson's sound design are outstanding.

Dressers and stagehands deserve a hand as well, keeping the show moving by getting the actors in and out of costumes in a flash and providing more hilarity by tossing Nicodemus' wooden leg into the fray or scaring Lady Enid with a wolf's head on a stick.

But it's Bender and Cariani you've come to see, and they do not disappoint. The heftier Bender's elegant Lady Enid in pencil skirt or voluminous gown contrasts with his robed and fezzed Alcazar and the hunched-over Nicodemus with wooden leg and withered hand and, of course, the mummy Pev Amri.

The slighter Cariani knows just how to modify the patrician bearing of Lord Edgar to become convincing as housekeeper Jane, and then sufficiently menacing as an intruder.

Both are excellent at turn-on-a-dime characterizations and accents. They're obviously having such a good time, it would seem churlish not to join in.

Ludlum once said of his art, "Don't look for deeper meaning. Just take it at face value."

If you do that, you'll have a wonderful time.

The Old Globe Theatre's production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep* plays through Sept. 6, at the Museum of Art's Copley Auditorium. Shows Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 7 p.m.; Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m.; matinees Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. For tickets, call 619-23-GLOBE or visit www.theoldglobe.org. ●



The Mystery of Irma Vep: (l to r) Jeffrey M. Bender as "Nicodemus" and John Cariani as "Jane Twisden" in Charles Ludlam's gothic spoof, 'The Mystery of Irma Vep,' at The Old Globe July 31 - Sept. 6, 2009.

CREDIT: CRAIG SCHWABTZ

The Mystery Of Irma Vep

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A young woman arrives at a grand and stately manor, the second wife of its handsome owner, only to be surrounded by memories of wife number one, particularly those brought up by the mansion's sinister housekeeper. (That's Alfred Hitchcock-Daphne DuMaurier's Rebecca, right?) Among the household staff is a hunchback swineherd who turns into a werewolf whenever the moon is full. (What? You don't remember that from Rebecca?) Another household worker is rumored to be one of those "beings who never die," aka a Vampire. (Now *that* sounds like Dracula!) Our widowed, remarried hero journeys to Cairo where his presence brings a long-dead Egyptian mummy back to life. (What kind of movie mishmash is this? Have we died and gone to horror movie heaven, or hell?)

In fact, we have entered the wildly imaginative world of Charles Ludlam, author of the play which jumbles all these movie classics into one campy delight, *The Mystery Of Irma Vep*, now playing at San Diego's Old Globe Theatre in a production that simply could not be better or funnier.

The Mystery Of Irma Vep, at one time the most produced play in the U.S., is not only one of the most hilarious satires ever written for the stage, it also provides two same-gendered actors the chance to give tour de force performances—something which is absolutely the case at the Globe, with Broadway's Jeffrey M. Bender and Tony nominee John Ciarani stealing scenes left and right, or rather on all four sides, as this production is presented in the round.

Irma Vep begins in the best Rebecca fashion, with housekeeper Jane Twisden (Ciarani) informing wooden-legged servant Nicodemus Underwood (Bender) that their master's new wife, Lady Enid, will "never make a fit mistress for Mandacrest. She'll never live up to the high standards set by Lady Irma." Clearly, asserts Jane, the second Lady Hillcrest lacks the "fine breeding and savoir fair" of Lady Irma, prompting Nic to reply, "If that French means what I think it does, you'd better wash your mouth out with soap." Lighting flashes and thunder claps, and Nicodemus tries to put his arm around Jane. "Keep your hands to yourself," orders the housekeeper. "You smell like a stable." "If you slept in a table," replies Nic, "you'd smell like one too!" And then he adds, "I'm not leaving till you give me a kiss." "I'll see you hanged first," threatens Jane. "Give me a little kiss," responds Nicodemus, "and then I'll show you how I'm hung."

The above exchange is just a taste of the outrageously "camp" sensibility of playwright Ludlam's imaginative writing, and as other characters join the action (never more than two on stage at once of course), the laughs and surprises keep coming fast and furious. Much of the play's humor comes from a clever skewering of Victorian melodrama, as when Lady Enid cries out, "No sleep! No sleep for me! I shall never sleep again! Sleep is dead. Sleep is dead. She hath murdered sleep. I dare not be alone to sleep. Don't leave me alone. Don't ever leave me alone again. For sleep is dead. Sleep is dead. Who murdered sleep?" (How's that for overkill?) There are plenty of dramatic fadeouts as well, for example when Nicodemus tells Jane that the master's killing the wolf which has been terrorizing the town is "cause for rejoicing," and Jane responds ominously, "It's no rejoicing there'll be tonight, Nicodemus Underwood. He's killed the wrong wolf!" Flash of lightning. Clap of thunder. Blackout.

Like Charles Busch's heroines (also portrayed by a man, often Busch himself), many of the laughs come from the humor inherent in cross-gender casting, and lines like Big And Tall-size former actress Lady Enid's "I'm on an eternal diet. The stage you know," are particularly funny simply because of who is saying them.

If *The Mystery Of Irma Vep* gets laughs galore in a traditional proscenium staging, the Old Globe's in-the-round configuration adds even more. Since there is no backdrop to hide behind, Chris Wollman as "The Third Man" is ever visible for "shock moments." When a bony hand reaches through the French door curtains, we see not just the hand (at the end of a stick), but Wollman manipulating it, then noiselessly exiting. When a "horrible face" appears at the window, it's Wollman we see holding up a mask. Wollman later reappears to open a secret sliding panel by remote control, the same type used to manipulate toy helicopters. (Adding to the laughs at the performance reviewed here was a secret panel malfunction.)



Jane and Lord Edgar are the two roles brought to life by Cariani, who recently appeared at the Ahmanson in Minsky's and got his Tony nomination for playing Motel in *Fiddler On The Roof*. His black-garbed Jane looks deliciously like Hitchcock's Mrs. Danvers and speaks in an almost indescribable nasal whine, the last syllable of every sentence stretched out an extra second ... or two ... or three. The dashing Lord Edgar wears a mustache which, as the evening progresses, begins to have difficulty staying attached. (More laughs.) In the performance I attended, Jane once showed up briefly mustachioed. Only Cariani's moment of "losing it" indicated that this might not have been scripted, or then again, perhaps it was part of Ludlam's oh-so-quirky sense of humor.

Bender gets an extra two roles, making for a grand total of four. That his limping, lumbering Nicodemus can exit and only moments later a perfectly-coiffed (1940s style), tweedily-gowned Lady Enid can make her entrance would seem an impossibility, but Bender manages it. Lady Enid, particularly, is quite a creation, man-sized (and noticeably taller than Cariani's Lord Edgar) yet so quasi-feminine that one *almost* forgets the role is being played by a man. Bender later appears in full Egyptian garb as Alcazar, Lord Edgar's guide, and to even greater comic effect as Pev Amri, a curvaceous, bare-breasted mummy returned to life—one who looks uncannily like Lady Enid.

As hilarious as *The Mystery Of Irma Vep* is on paper, director Henry Wishcamper makes it even funnier, time and time again, with sight gags aplenty, and an ever imaginative use of the in-the-round staging. He is ably abetted, not just by his brilliant acting duo, but by his design team as well. Robin West's scenic design fills the stage with elegant period furniture and a particularly well-chosen fête-à-fête love seat. Jenny Mannis's costumes are period perfect *and* often outrageously funny, especially the strapless gown that a plus size, rather hirsute Lady Enid shows up in in Act Three. Jason Bieber's excellent lighting features plenty of lightning flashes to which Paul Peterson's sound design adds the thunder and just the right mood music.

Descriptions of *Irma Vep* by friends who are fans of the play did not prepare me for how absolutely hilarious and completely original Ludlam's comic spoof is. With Wishcamper at the helm and Bender and Cariani creating seven of the funniest characters likely to be seen on stage this year, the Old Globe's production of *The Mystery Of Irma Vep* is a smart, delicious, perfectly achieved crowd pleaser. It's a production I could easily see again and again.

The Old Globe Arena Stage, San Diego Museum Of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium, Balboa Park, 1363 Old Globe Way, San Diego. Through September 6. Wednesdays at 7:00. Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00. Saturdays at 2:00 and 8:00. Sundays at 2:00 and 7:00. Reservations: 619 234-5623 www.theoldglobe.org

--Steven Stanley
August 10, 2009

Photos: Craig Schwartz

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The Mystery of Irma Vep is Ridiculous Fun

Posted by [admin](#) on 8/24/09 • Categorized as [Theater](#)

By Charlene Baldrige



Once upon a time, when Jerry Patch was artistic director at the Old Globe, he instituted a program in which that august institution took a new look at classic plays or more recent fare that in his opinion had not been given a fair shake the first time around. It was a grand idea that resulted in many fine new looks, including the recent production of John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation."

Currently in production and bidding farewell to the Globe's temporary Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art's remodeled Copley Auditorium, is a new look at Charles Ludlam's 1984 comedy "The Mystery of Irma Vep."

The original off-off-Broadway production took place at Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company and starred Ludlam and his longtime partner, actor and costume designer Everett Quinton. Between them, they played all eight characters in the penny dreadful melodrama, a send up of film (largely Alfred Hitchcock's "Rebecca") and theater that embraces such elements as vampires, werewolves, ghosts and the mysteries of Egypt. Irma Vep is an anagram for "vampire." Ludlam once said that their intent was to play the piece, written for two actors, very seriously but in camp style.

In the Old Globe production, which stars Jeffrey M. Bender in the Ludlam roles and John Cariani in the Quinton roles, director Henry Wishcamper places emphasis on the serious component of the original intent, with nary a wink at camp. Granted it is exceptionally intellectual camp and this is the Old Globe. Curiously, with a few bumps and grinds, Wishcamper makes the play's covert sexual innuendo overt.

Lady Enid Hillcrest (Bender) has recently wed the widowed Lord Edgar Hillcrest (Cariani) of Mandecrest manor. The lord is landed gentry with an avid interest in Egyptology. In his employ is former governess now housekeeper Jane Twisden (also Bender). Cariani's Jane is a sour spinster with a penchant for elongated n's and m's and a deliciously nasty, nasal twang. One of this production's highlights is a vocal duet accompanied by dulcimer, sung/played by Lady Enid and Jane. Bender's Enid is a great, heavily bosomed, gawping female, hilarious by mere juxtaposition with Cariani's diminutive Sir Edgar, whose moustache keeps slipping and who gets lost continuously in her enormous décolletage.

Bender also portrays the dim-witted hunchback, Nicodemus, who transforms by the full moon, apparently, into the werewolf held responsible for the deaths of Irma Vep, the former Lady Hillcrest, and her son, Victor.

The wonderment of the play lies in two men making quick changes and vocal adjustments as in quicksilver fashion they exit as one and then instantaneously re-enter as another. In a smaller space, such as the former Cassius Carter Centre Stage, everything would move as “Irma” should, quickly and quicksilverly. Here, because of the long distances each actor must gallop, the pace drags despite their amazing skills.

Then there is the matter of camp and its definition. Underlying camp is a secret to which the audience must be privy — that the actors, despite their seriousness, are amused at their own ability to send up and emote all this ridiculous stuff.

Jenny Mannis’s costumes are exceptionally apt, especially Lady Enid’s satin and roses ball gown. Robin Vest’s scenic design stretches from sea to shining sea, a bit redolent of the attic in the Globe’s recent production of “The Price.” The program page declares the play set “between the two wars” – presumably between the two world wars. Paul Peterson’s sound design is a romp and a half, riffing between musical depictions of tempests, Hollywood bodice rippers and Egyptian kitsch. Jason Bieber’s lighting is also amusing, placing emphasis on the manor’s portrait gallery and freezing characters at moments of possible revelation. But as they say, it’s all ridiculous and great fun.

“The Mystery of Irma Vep” continues through September 6 at the Old Globe’s Arena Stage at James S. Copley Auditorium, San Diego Museum of Art in Balboa Park. Tickets are \$29-\$59. For more information, call (619) 23-GLOBE or visit www.theoldglobe.org.

Charlene Baldrige

Freelance Arts Writer

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The Mystery of Irma Vep

Old Globe Theater, San Diego

July 31-Sept 6, 2009

<http://www.oldglobe.org/> (<http://www.oldglobe.org/>)



The Mystery of Irma Vep

Jeffrey M. Bender as "Lady Enid Hillcrest" and John Cariani as "Jane Twisden" in

Charles Ludlam's gothic spoof. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

The Mystery of Irma Vep, playing at The Old Globe's arena stage in the San Diego Museum of Art, is a tour de force of campy low comedy. Set primarily in Mandacrest, Lord Edgar Hillcrest's estate, the play begins with servants Jane Twisden and Nicodemus Underwood gossiping about Enid, the new lady Hillcrest. But the minimal plot revolves around Irma, the old lady Hillcrest, who died tragically three years earlier. Lord Edgar is torn between his new and old brides, but this is merely a side note in the ongoing drama that pervades Mandacrest. There are plots, mysteries and a plethora of horror movie staples as the show spoofs everything from the Mummy's Curse to The Matrix in grand Victorian style.

John Cariani and Jeffrey M. Bender are a frenetically busy cast of two, as each takes on multiple characters, sometimes in the same breath. They scamper masterfully between roles and unselfconsciously embrace each melancholy flourish. Don't expect these two to honor the fourth wall. In addition to Lord and Lady Hillcrest, Cariani and Bender take on Twisden, Underwood, an intruder, a mummy and more.

The show is melodramatic in the most positive sense of the word. Each over-the-top swoon, clichéd movie trope and awkward character switch is a wink to the audience and an admonition not to take any of this too seriously.

Written by Charles Ludlam, the Obie-winning farce is crisply directed by Henry Wishcamper. The set, which includes a ring of family portraits, evokes the luxuriant decay and overall creepiness of Mandacrest. The Mystery of Irma Vep runs through September 6.

Joshua Baxt

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'Godspell' Let there be breakdancing....Lamb's Players put a modern spin on this musical, based on the Gospel of Matthew. *Horton Grand Theatre, 444 Fourth Ave., Downtown-Gaslamp. Through Aug. 30. 619-437-0600, lambsplayers.org. \$26-\$28.*

'The Glory of Living' Playwright Rebecca Gilman was named a 2001 Pulitzer Prize finalist for the tale of a 15-year-old girl and her ex-con husband. *Queen Bee, 3925 Ohio St., North Park. Through Aug. 14. 619-750-6205.*

'Time Files' New Village Arts presents this series of short plays by David Ives. *New Village Arts Theatre, 2787 State St. Through Aug. 16. 760-433-3245.*

'The Mystery of Irma Vep' The Old Globe presents Charles Ludlam's hilarious Obie Award-winning play. *Copley Auditorium, 1450 El Prado, Balboa Park. Through Sept. 6. 619-234-5623, theoldglobe.org. \$29-\$59.*

'Herringbone' Tony Award-winner BD Wong stars in this vaudeville dark comedy at La Jolla Playhouse. *La Jolla Playhouse, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla-UTC. Through Aug. 30. 858-550-1010. \$30-\$65.*

Shakespeare Open Readings at Seaport Village At Upstart Crow Bookstore and Coffeehouse the first Tuesday of each month. Directed by Rupert Essinger. *Upstart Crow Bookstore and Coffee House, 835 W. Harbor Drive, Downtown-Gaslamp. Through Dec. 1. 619-232-4855. Free.*

'The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)' Lotus Theatre Collective and Talent to a Muse stage a romp through all the Bard's works. *The Swedenborg Hall, 1531 Tyler St., University Heights. Through Aug. 29. 858-274-1731. \$15.*

'Rent: School Edition' Actors' Conservatory Theatre presents a youth production of the Broadway hit, "Rent," inside the Lyceum Theatre. *Lyceum Theatre, 79 Horton Plaza, Downtown-Gaslamp. Through Aug. 16. 619-544-1000.*

'Leaving Iowa' Lamb's Players Theatre presents Tim Clue and Spike Manton's new comedy about a family vacation. Tickets on sale now. *Lamb's Players Theatre, 1142 Orange Ave., Coronado. Through Sept. 20. 619-437-0600, lambsplayers.org. \$20-\$56.*

'City of Angels' Patio Playhouse Community Theater presents this jazzy musical comedy. *Kit Carson Amphitheater, 3333 Bear Valley Parkway, Escondido. Through Aug. 29. 760-746-6669. \$15-\$17.*

'The 39 Steps' Patrick Barlow's Tony Award-winning, comedic adaptation of the whodunit Alfred Hitchcock made famous. At La Jolla Playhouse. *La Jolla Playhouse, 2910 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla-UTC. Through Sept. 13. 858-550-1010, lajollaplayhouse.org. \$30-\$65.*

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It is becoming a trend for Broadway producers to premiere new musicals in San Diego, at either the Old Globe Theatre (*Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*) or the La Jolla Playhouse (*Jersey Boys*). The Old Globe alone has been responsible for sending 20 productions on to Broadway.

The latest Broadway-bound offering is *The First Wives Club*, with a book by Rupert Holmes and music by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Eddie Holland, the trio who wrote music for the Supremes, Marvin Gaye, The Four Tops, and Martha and the Vandellas. Francesca Zambello directs and Lisa Stevens is the choreographer.

The story is, of course, based on the hit Hollywood movie by the same name and Oliver Goldsmith's bestselling novel. Four classmates get together in middle age only to find they share the same fate: their husbands are leaving them. This proves too much for one of the women (Victoria Matlock, in great singing voice), who decides to end it all. This spurs the "First Wives Club," as the remaining woman call themselves, to take matters into their own hands and exact revenge, with the help of a gay friend, Duane (Sam Harris).

The cast is loaded with stars: Karen Ziemba (*Contact*, *Steel Pier*, *Curtains*, *Never Gonna Dance*), Barbara Walsh (*Falsest*, *Hairspray*, *Nine*), and Sheryl Lee Ralph (*Dreamgirls*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*). Yet even with all this talent the show fails to ignite. It reminded me of the short-lived *Nine To Five*, which had a lot of great moments but did not gel as a whole.

There are also problems with several other aspects of the show. When it is dramatic and plays to the performers' strengths it works best, but to have a dancer like Ziemba in the cast and not let her really dance seems criminal. I found Zambello's direction uninspired, though she did keep things moving. More serious, however, is the fact that no one changes or grows in the piece, except for one wife, who had been a holdout, finally deciding to get even. It doesn't say much good about women (or men for that matter, seeing as they are all busy chasing younger women) that all they can do is exact revenge. I didn't like it in the movie and I don't like it here.

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ROBERT MACHRAY has appeared in over 150 plays and has worked at 14 Tony Award-winning theatres. He has been nominated for and won numerous awards. Robert has a B.A. from Yale and an M.F.A. from USC. He has taught at USC, UCLA, UCSB, and Pasadena City College. ...

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Kristin Perkins

Teen Theatre Perspective

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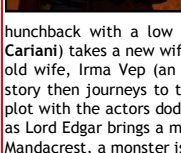
Colonel Mustard in the drawing room with the candlestick! The penny-dreadful farce, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, is making waves at the Old Globe. Making references from Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* to the board game, *Clue*, every twist and turn of the story will have you shaking in your seat with laughter.



Written by Charles Ludlam, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* was originally produced in 1984 off-off-Broadway in New York City's Greenwich Village with Ludlam as a lead. The show was then revived off-Broadway in 1998 and nominated for the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Revival of a Play. The extraordinary factor of this show is that in 1991, it became the most produced play in America, and in 2003, became the longest running play in Brazil.



On the moors of Mandacrest, with a *Wuthering Heights* sort of feel, the beginning of hilarity is set when the house keeper, Jane, played by John Cariani enters onto the stage with dark, outrageous music.



Shortly after, the groundskeeper, Nicodemus (Jeffery M. Bender), a hunchback with a low growling voice, stalks onto the scene. Lord Edgar Hillcrest (John Cariani) takes a new wife, Lady Enid (Jeffery M. Bender) while still caught up in a spell of his old wife, Irma Vep (an anagram for "Vampire"), and hunted by a suspicious monster. The story then journeys to the deserts of Egypt while the idea of *Indiana Jones* careens into the plot with the actors dodging a beach ball, functioning as a boulder. *The Mummy* is alluded to as Lord Edgar brings a mummy to life after reading graphic hieroglyphics. Then later, back at Mandacrest, a monster is revealed to this troubled couple.



Actors John Cariani and Jeffery M. Bender played all the roles, each taking on completely different personas from a low-voiced, slumping hunchback to a breathy, graceful lady of the house; the enormous skill level of each actor was incredible. Each character just missed their other figure, though voices off-stage sometimes collided. There was no wait with quick costume changes happening in seconds. Although chaotic backstage, on stage there was nothing but amusement. A third man, with a stage hand like costume, Chris Wollman, offered props and hidden excitement, from coming to a window with a giant monster mask, to opening a "secret passage" with a remote control, the entire show was incredibly thought out and extremely detailed.

With a set taken out of a gothic, Victorian novel, paintings and priceless antiques hung from the walls of the arena stage. An inventive set, designed by Robin Vest, the drawing room became the backdrop for most of the show, though the perspective was shifted cleverly at the start of Act Two. The creation of Egypt was magnificently simple, though entirely creative with a sand-colored piece of carpet and a blow-up palm tree. Lighting was menacing and whimsical by Jason Bieber particularly pulsing with the sound designed by Paul Peterson. Wilder and wilder costumes came onto the stage as fanciful Victorian style morphed into a risen-from-the-dead mummy to the masks of vampires and werewolves. Designed by Jenny Mannis, the costumes played into the mirth of the piece.

Simply put, director Henry Wishcamper is a genius. All the details of the production are looked into and created flawlessly into a fantastic piece of theatre. I could not stop laughing; this is the funniest show I have ever seen, YOU MUST GO SEE THIS SHOW! Playing through September 6th, you can call (619) 23-GLOBE or go online to www.theoldglobe.org for more information.

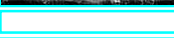
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Coriolanus Review Kristin Perkins

The tragedy in Old Globe's annual Shakespeare Festival this year is *Coriolanus* a bleak portrayal of war, politics and the human folly apparent in both.



One of Shakespeare's lesser known tragedies, *Coriolanus* is the story of a Roman soldier, Caius Martius Coriolanus (left), a war hero who is banished from Rome through the influence of two offended tribunes. He joins his blood enemy, Tullus Aufidius (Brendan Griffin, right) to attack Rome. Relenting to his mother's begging he has a change of heart and spares the city; angered, Aufidius kills him.

Instead of ancient Rome, this adaptation was set in post WWI Europe which fits the political themes of the original setting such as unrest of the masses, as well as being relevant to our own present day political and economic issues. Director **Darko Tresnjak** cut copious amounts of the script in order to keep the audience engaged.

It's hard to emotionally sympathize with the characters. Most characters are caught in deceitful struggles for power or revenge. When at last Coriolanus is killed, one feels little sorrow. Instead of evoking teary emotion, or heartbreak the tragedy plays out in horror. In the final scene the open-mouthed, haunted-looking mother is a provocative image that doesn't fail to impress upon the mind.



In fact, **Celeste Ciulla** (left) as Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia, was impressive throughout the performance - power-hungry and manipulative; she is the one force able to dominate her fiercely independent son. The character evolved from a proud, arrogant, wide-legged stance, to desperate begging, each change convincing and motivated. Also notable was **Greg Derelian**, who played the title character (right). Harsh and overpowering with his derisive laughter, Caius Martius Coriolanus is a full-fleshed character with independent thoughts. More as caricatures, the two tribunes, played by **Grant Goodman** and **James Newcomb** had great chemistry together as they scheme and smoke their cigars.

One of the "actors" I was not impressed with was not real at all. In one of the impassioned scenes near the end, the dialogue between Volumnia (Ciulla) and Coriolanus (Derehan) is disrupted by the distraction of a dummy employed to play the part of Coriolanus' son. This plastic faced pre-adolescent, whether a metaphorical statement or not, detracts from a crucial turning point.

However the lighting by **York Kennedy** was superb and helped to direct and dramatize the action. Without scene changes, as one set of actors exit another enter, the lighting allows this blending of scenes to happen smoothly. Besides these practical purposes the lighting accentuates the moods of the play, for example by establishing the setting behind a party, or spot-lighting a grief stricken face.

The sound design of **Christopher R. Walker** kept the audience enveloped in the ambience of the play with the clash of war all around or the shouts of banishment.

Coriolanus will be playing at the Old Globe until September. For more information and to check dates go online at www.oldglobe.org. Don't forget to bring a jacket!

(Pictures by **Craig Schwartz**)

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Dale Morris

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by Rob Appel
Posted on 08/18/09

The Mystery of Irma Vep

by: **Rob Appel** | [In the Spotlight](#) | August 18th, 2009



Jeffrey M. Bender as "Lady Enid Hillcrest" (l. to r.) Jeffrey M. Bender as "Lady Enid Hillcrest" and John Cariani as "Jane Twisden" Jeffrey M. Bender as "Nicodemus" and John Cariani as "Jane Twisden"

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(As noted) Who is Irma Vep? That's the mystery at the heart of this outrageously funny tour-de-force. On a "dark and stormy night," Lady ENID arrives at an estate with her new husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife, and haunted by something that's prowling the grounds. Strange things begin to happen around Lady ENID, while the mysterious portrait of IRMA VEP hanging over the fireplace, gazes down upon her. The Mystery of IRMA VEP is a hilarious comedy that satirizes everything from Alfred Hitchcock's REBECCA to Victorian Melodrama, to The Mummy's Curse.

As you enter the new, Old Globe 'black-box' Arena Stage, a period parlor beautifully designed and lit by Robin Vest and Jason Bieber greets you....a more comfortable environment, one cannot imagine, as the unique sound effects by Paul Peterson take you off on the journey of two camelian actors...Jeffrey Bender and John Coriani, and their spot-on stage-hand-assistant "Chris", bringing on-and-off the needed props and special effects....adding to the sometimes Monte Python sight-gag-routines. It is the harmony and tightness of the two actors working together that keeps the laughs non-stop, but the total visual jackpot of Jeffrey Bender's duo hunchback NICODERMUS, and his high-camp drag Lady ENID, that doubles one up in howls of laughter. Sprinkled with juicy one-liners "Virginity...is the balloon of life...it vanishes with the first prick", it is Jenny Mannis' quick-change costuming design that adds measurably to the on-stage antics!



With author Charles Ludlam, an actor, director, playwright, and founder of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in New York City, his *The Mystery of IRMA VEP* is a delightful theatrical evening out ... highly recommended for those seeking "something to do" ... and a way to share a laugh or two (three, four, etc...) with a special friend or loved one ... go see it! Playing nightly through Sept 6th, for ticketing, call... **(619) 23-GLOBE**, or go online at www.theoldglobe.org.

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by Rob Appel
Posted on 08/18/09

The Mystery of Irma Vep

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Jeffrey Bender (left) and John Cariani in "The Mystery of Irma Vep." (Photo by Craig Schwartz)

Vamping with Vampires

THE SHOW: "The Mystery of Irma Vep," the 1984 Charles Ludlam play at the Old Globe

Charles Ludlam was a little ridiculous. Well, that was the name of his group, anyway — the Ridiculous Theatre Company. The title often applied to his plays, which combined elements of gothic novels, Shakespeare, Wagner, popular culture, old movies, and anything else that he could milk for a laugh. Ludlam typically appeared in his own creations, usually in the women's roles.

His most enduring legacy (he died of AIDS in 1987, at age 44) is "The **Mystery of Irma Vep**," in which Ludlam performed with his long-time partner, Everett Quinton. It was a tour de force that won an Off Broadway Obie Award and was hailed (by The New York Times and Time Magazine), as one of the best plays of 1984. During the early 1990s, "Irma Vep" became one of the most produced plays in America. In order to ensure that the piece retains its original... um, luster, the rental rights stipulate that the performers must be of the same sex. This guarantees a flurry of cross-dressing; the work itself, eight characters written for two actors, is a freewheeling invitation to mayhem.

The gothic spoof begins, aptly enough, on a dark and stormy night, and it's rife with melodrama, farce, vaudeville and satire. Lord Edgar, an Egyptologist, is the owner of the foreboding Mandecrest Manor, isolated on the English moors. Edgar can't seem to get over his dead wife, whose portrait retains a place of prominence in his home. But he blithely brings in his new spouse, the skittish Lady Enid, who is resented by the suspicious housekeeper, Jane, though the swinish swineherd, Nicodemus, comes to feel for her. Somewhere, beneath the madness of werewolves and vampires and mummies, there's a message about liberating oneself from one's past. The political undertones about Western imperialism are buried in this production, as are some of the wink-nudge references to Conrad, DuMaurier, Jane Eyre and Baby Jane (though there is one definite nod to "Nosferatu").

Silliness and slapstick abound, which brings us to the central problem. There's just too much gravitas at the Globe and too much inanity in the play for this to be a gratifying match. On top of that, the piece is being done in the (temporary) arena theater, which seems to be a case of dramatic masochism. The plot, such as it is, is just too preposterous for words. The greatest dollop of humor comes from the lightning-fast costume changes, as well as some of the barely-offstage business, such as monstrous claws and rabid dogs at the window. When you're in the round, there are no windows.

Director Henry Wishcamper and his two competent actors do the best they can under the constraining circumstances, but some of the sharpest humor is lost. They're forced to add another player (the silent Third Man) and repeatedly break the fourth wall, commenting to the audience about the difficulty of getting from one side of the stage to another. Both these tactics are funny the first time.

The costumes (Jenny Mannis) are comical. The set (Robin Vest) is stuffed to the gills with... stuff: candelabra, red velvet curtains, a zebra rug, animal heads, wood banisters, candles, a knight's armor, and of course, portraits of the "family," including the one of Irma that magically drips blood in the murderous second act. The sound (Paul Peterson) is outstanding, what with its gales and screams and wolf howls. The lighting (Jason Bieber) is suitably eerie, stormy and ghostly.

Broadway veterans Jeffrey Bender and John Cariani are quite entertaining, but they're never drop-dead hilarious, which could certainly be said of local actor David McBean, when he starred in the Diversionary Theatre production of 2002. The big, hulking Bender is especially apt as the hunchbacked Nicodemus, dragging his leg up the stage steps. He's sexy - in a sexist way - as the topless, dancing mummy, though his Lady Enid is quite ungainly; "her" best moment is when she dons a froufrou strapless dress that reveals Bender's hairy chest.

But what's with the dulcimer-playing - twice? I'd say it was a stall-technique, except the second time, it was a duet!

Trim, lanky Cariani is excellent as the twisted Jane Twisden and Lord Edgar, whose self-strangulation scene is the funniest of the evening.

It feels long; 90 minutes of this kind of craziness would be quite enough. The on-and-offstage dash certainly adds to the pandemonium, as well as the running time, though the aisle stairways are used to comic effect. And audience interaction is always good for a laugh. But this production is not quite crazy/funny enough, not campy or vampy or even farcically dead-serious enough, which leaves us with the impression that the effort is, well, beneath the Globe.

THE LOCATION: The Old Globe's temporary space at the San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium, in Balboa Park. (619) 23-GLOBE; www.theoldglobe.org

THE DETAILS: Tickets: \$29-59. Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday at 7 p.m.; Thursday-Saturday at 8 p.m., Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m., through September 6.



Joshua Everett Johnson and Rachael VanWormer in "Soap Opera." (Photo by Daren Scott)

on the play by Tom Cone, directed by Roger Rees, running through Aug. 30 in the Sheila and Hughes Potiker Theatre.

CREDIT: CRAIG SCHWARTZ

Something sinister is afoot at Mandacrest, the English estate owned by Lord Edgar Hillcrest (John Cariani) and his new wife Lady Enid (Jeffrey M. Bender).

For one thing, that portrait of previous wife Irma Vep staring down from the wall is, well, kind of creepy, and Lady Enid wants it removed. The housekeeper, Jane Twisden (Cariani) misses her previous mistress: "I can't bear the thought of her in a grave. She was always so afraid of the dark." Jane has not taken well to Lady Enid.

A wolf seems to haunt the manor, and there's Nicodemus the peg-legged caretaker (Bender), who has an unusual relationship with the full moon.

Are you getting the idea? It's Charles Ludlam's hilarious send-up of Victorian and gothic parlor mysteries, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, playing through Sept. 6 at the Museum of Art's Copley Auditorium. Henry Wishcamper directs.

Bender and Cariani play seven characters between them in this tour de force romp that careens through some of the best-known works in the genre including *Rebecca*, *The Mummy's Curse* and *Wolf Man*. It's all very silly and a whale of a lot of fun.

A jaunt to Egypt in the second act nets Lord Edgar a pristine tomb, complete with mummy (thanks to mysterious local expert Alcazar). Of course, Lord Edgar ships the mummy home as a souvenir, just in time to find not just the wolves getting out of control, but Jane, Lady Enid and Nicodemus as well. Then there's the revelation that Irma Vep is anagrammatic for (wait for it) vampire.

The show's design team should take a bow. Robin Vest's set is terrific – a beautifully appointed English drawing room, with "family portraits" all around, a suit of armor, a "zebra" hide and a stuffed animal. The living room holds a great double-sided settee, a chaise and two intriguing tables with knickknacks.

Likewise, Jenny Mannis' costumes, Jason Bieber's lighting and Paul Peterson's sound design are outstanding.

Dressers and stagehands deserve a hand as well, keeping the show moving by getting the actors in and out of costumes in a flash and providing more hilarity by tossing Nicodemus' wooden leg into the fray or scaring Lady Enid with a wolf's head on a stick.

But it's Bander and Cariani you've come to see, and they do not disappoint. The heftier Bender's elegant Lady Enid in pencil skirt or voluminous gown contrasts with his robed and fezzed Alcazar and the hunched-over Nicodemus with wooden leg and withered hand and, of course, the mummy Pev Amri.

The slighter Cariani knows just how to modify the patrician bearing of Lord Edgar to become convincing as housekeeper Jane, and then sufficiently menacing as an intruder.

Both are excellent at turn-on-a-dime characterizations and accents. They're obviously having such a good time, it would seem churlish not to join in.

Ludlum once said of his art, "Don't look for deeper meaning. Just take it at face value."

If you do that, you'll have a wonderful time.

The Old Globe Theatre's production of *The Mystery of Irma Vep* plays through Sept. 6, at the Museum of Art's Copley Auditorium. Shows Sunday, Tuesday and Wednesday at 7 p.m.; Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m.; matinées Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m. For tickets, call 619-23-GLOBE or visit www.theoldglobe.org.

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The Mystery of Irma Vep: (l to r) Jeffrey M. Bender as "Nicodemus" and John Cariani as "Jane Twisden" in Charles Ludlam's gothic spoof, 'The Mystery of Irma Vep,' at The Old Globe July 31 - Sept. 6, 2009.

CREDIT: CRAIG SCHWARTZ

RANCHO SANTA FE REVIEW

August 20, 2009

Very funny off-Broadway hit 'The Mystery of Irma Vep' now playing at the Old Globe

By Alice Cash



Alice Cash

Colonel Mustard in the drawing room with the candlestick! The penny-dreadful farce "The Mystery of Irma Vep" is making waves at the Old Globe. Making references from Alfred Hitchcock's "Rebecca" to the board game Clue, every twist and turn of the story will have you shaking in your seat with laughter.

Written by Charles Ludlam, "The Mystery of Irma Vep" was originally produced in 1984 off-off-Broadway in New York City's Greenwich Village with Ludlam as a lead. The show

Theater review — from a teen perspective

was then revived off-Broadway in 1998 and nominated for the Outer Critics Circle Award for Outstanding Revival of a Play. The extraordinary factor of this show is that in 1991, it became the most produced play in America, and in 2003, became the longest running play in Brazil.

On the moors of Mandacrest, with a Wuthering Heights sort of feel, the beginning of hilarity is set when the house keeper, Jane, played by John Cariani, enters onto the stage with dark, outrageous music. Shortly after, the groundskeeper, Nicodemus (Jeffery M. Bender), a hunchback with a low growling voice, stalks onto the scene. Lord Edgar Hillcrest (John Cariani) takes a new wife, Lady Enid (Jeffery M. Bender), while still caught up in a spell of his old wife, Irma Vep (an anagram for "Vampire"), and hunted by a suspicious monster. The story then journeys to the deserts of Egypt while the idea of Indiana Jones careens into the plot with the actors dodging a beach ball, functioning as a boulder. The Mummy is alluded to as Lord Edgar brings a mummy to life after reading graphic hieroglyphics. Then later, back at Mandacrest, a monster is revealed to this troubled couple.

Actors John Cariani and Jeffery M. Bender played all the roles, each taking on completely different personas from a low-voiced, slumping hunchback to a breathy, graceful lady of the house; the enormous skill level of each actor was incredible. Each character just missed their other figure, though voices off-stage sometimes collided. There was no wait with quick costume changes happening in seconds. Although chaotic backstage, on stage there was nothing but amusement. A third man, with a stage hand like costume, Chris Wollman, offered props and hidden excitement, from coming to a window with a giant monster mask, to opening a "secret passage" with a remote control, the entire show was incredibly thought out and extremely detailed.

With a set taken out of a gothic Victorian novel, paintings and priceless antiques hung from the walls of the arena stage. An inventive set, designed by Robin Vest, the drawing room became the backdrop for most of the show, though the perspective was shifted cleverly at the start of Act Two. The creation of Egypt was magnificently simple, though entirely creative with a sand-colored piece of carpet and a blow-up palm tree. Lighting, by Jason Bieber, was menacing and whimsical and was made particularly pulsing with the sound designed by Paul Peterson. Wilder and wilder costumes came onto the stage as fanciful Victorian style morphed into a risen-from-the-dead mummy to the masks of vampires and werewolves. Designed by Jenny Mannis, the costumes played into the mirth of the piece.

Simply put, director Henry Wishcamper is a genius. All the details of the production are looked into and created flawlessly into a fantastic piece of theatre. I could not stop laughing; this is the funniest show I have ever seen — you must go see this show! Playing through Sept. 6, you can call (619) 23-GLOBE or go online to www.theoldglobe.org for more information.

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Karensa LaGear



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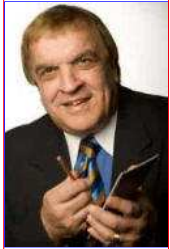



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Curtain

CURTAIN CALLS

With Charlene Baldrige

Curtain Calls #19

By Charlene Baldrige



The unexpected week, examined

The week's unplanned wonders presented the amazing juxtaposition of two wildly diverse theatrical exercises, which opened on consecutive evenings. There was also unexpected melody that had great resonance with the theatre (see The Basement). Then there was another theatrical/musical evening that had more to do with catching up than adding to meaning.

The first bit of theatre involves two actors playing eight characters in Charles Ludlam's mad excursion though Gothic melodrama, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*. The second features one actor/singer/dancer playing the entire cast of a most unusual chamber musical known as *Herringbone*.

Two on eight at summer "camp"

THE SHOW: Charles Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* produced by the Old Globe and directed by Henry Wishcamper at the Arena Stage at San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium



THE STORY: This 1984 off-off-Broadway work, an example of Ludlam's theatre of the ridiculous style, is set in the English countryside and Egypt between the two world wars. The heroine, Lady Enid Hillcrest, a former actress, has recently wed the widowed Lord Edgar, an amateur Egyptologist with a Mummy fixation. In an attempt to acclimate to Mandacrest manor, more fully understand Lord Edgar, and satisfy her curiosity about the untimely deaths of her immediate predecessor, Irma Vep, and her young son, Victor, Lady Enid solicits information from the dour housekeeper, Jane Twisden. Other than a hunchback handyman named Nicodemus, Lord and Lady Hillcrest and Jane make up the entire population of Mandacrest, that is, unless one counts a pesky werewolf, assorted ghostly intruders, and that bleeding portrait of Irma Vep that hangs above the fireplace. Lord Edgar makes a tomb-raiding trip to Egypt, meets assorted characters, and returns with a Mummy, whom he brought to life briefly. Eventually, all mysteries are solved.

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THE PERFORMERS: Jeffrey Bender, second violin in the Globe's *Opus*, takes on the Ludlam roles, which include Lady Enid, Nicodemus and others; and John Cariani (right) essays the Everett Quinton roles of Lord Edgar, Jane and others. Each Globe actor does a marvelous job with accents, gender mannerisms and quiriness. Bender's Enid (think *Rebecca*) is all maidenly innocence, which is hysterically funny in so large a man, got up in tremendous bosoms and hair. His juxtaposition with Cariani's delicate, natty Lord Edgar is a delicious sight gag, especially when Edgar's fake moustache gets lost in Enid's knockers and passionate lip-lock. Cariani's Jane is wondrous, all nasal, feigned refinement, with prolonged N's and M's giving evidence of something much more sinister. The Enid/Jane vocal/dulcimer duet is a hoot.

THE PRODUCTION: Ludlam once said that his and Quinton's intent with *Irma* was to play it seriously but in camp style. One's enjoyment of this particular production may depend upon one's definition of and experience with theatrical camp, which extends beyond mere farce. Ludlam's camp is intellectually subtle, especially as compared, say, to Diversionary's recent literary romp with Charles Dickens' *Twist*, played in extreme camp and high dudgeon.

Despite an occasional bump and grind that pays overt homage to the sexual and same-sexual frisson implied in the text, Wishcamper nods only occasionally at camp, emphasizing instead the seriousness and sincerity of playing the style. As a matter of fact, Wishcamper's camp is the most restrained ever witnessed. It's not a romp, it's a stroll, which brings us to strolling. The production is hampered further by the arena's sheer size, which forces Bender and Cariani to sprint for costume changes; the first act especially sags considerably.

Paul Peterson's sound design riffs from 19th century depictions of a tempest to dark, horror flick glissandos to happy Sunnybook and back again. Robin Vest's detailed scenic design, rife with Egyptian memorabilia and a noble portrait gallery, is almost overkill. Jenny Mannis's costumes, especially Lady Enid's atrocious hand-me-down ball-gown, are marvelous, and Jason Bieber's lighting design is excellent.

THE LOCATION: 7 pm Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays; 8 pm Thursdays-Saturdays; 2 pm Saturdays and Sundays, through September 6 at the Old Globe's temporary Arena Stage, James S. Copley Auditorium, San Diego Museum of Art, Balboa Park, \$29-\$59, www.theoldglobe.org or (619) 23-GLOBE.

BOTTOM LINE: worth a try

The purging of George Nookin, or Not a cozy musical



THE SHOW: La Jolla Playhouse production of Tom Cone's *Herringbone*, with music by Skip Kennon and lyrics by Ellen Fitzhugh, with music direction by Dan Lipton, choreography by Darren Lee and direction by Roger Rees. BD Wong plays narrator George Nookin and ten additional characters. BD photos Crag Schwartz

THE STORY: As he relates at the top of the show, George Nookin (*Herringbone*) is compelled to tell the story of "one of those years" (he was 8) on a daily basis. The audience becomes the listener for tonight. It is 1929, the height of the Great Depression, and little George's parents, Arthur and Louise, struggle to put food on the table. Their anticipated legacy from the wealthy Uncle Billy doesn't pan out, so they enroll their son

San Diego Arts

"The Mystery of Irma Vep" at the Old Globe Theatre

Gothic confectionaries

By Welton Jones

Posted on Fri, Aug 7th, 2009

Last updated Fri, Aug 7th, 2009



Welton Jones

"Burlesque" in the American theatre doesn't mean only broad comedy and lusty babes. There's a grand stage tradition going back a couple of centuries which revels in crude puns, outrageous plots, cross-dressing, naughty innuendo, killer parody and slapstick violence.

Charles Ludlam (1943-1987) was the 20th Century master of the form. He had no serious competition.

He took on Hamlet in "Stage Blood," Wagner's "Ring" cycle in "Der Ring Gott Farblonjet," fairy tales with "The Enchanted Pig," ancient China with "Eunuchs if the Forbidden City," country music in "Corn," psychiatry in "Reverse Psychology" and pretty near everything else in his other 23 plays.

Maybe his most endearing (and certainly his most portable) piece was "The Mystery of Irma Vep," featuring himself and his partner, Everett Quinton, quick-changing through eight roles in an ultimate send-up of everything gothic and thrilling that he could find rummaging through his vast troves of cliché.

The Old Globe has a first-class production of "Irma Vep" with a pair of hard-working actors whose fault it is not that they hardly are Ludlam and Quinton.

John Cariani, whippet-thin and laser-intense, is a prim martinet of a housekeeper and the haunted baronet of the remote castle. Jeffrey M. Bender, heftier than one might expect, alternates deftly between the hideously deformed handyman who yearns for a soft word and the new lady of the castle, a borderline hysteric.

(Both also are responsible for an assortment of vampires, werewolves, mummies, maddened killers and assorted spooks. All in a night's work.)

The prop-heavy decor, by Robin Vest, achieves marvels in turning the Globe's temporary hall at the San Diego Museum of Art into a parody playground, assisted by Jason Bieber's slashing light design and the never modest but always well-tailored costumes of Jenny Mannis.

But the true champ of the show is Paul Peterson, who has scraped together a fabulous assortment of disposable salon music which underlines every scene with the proper mood and exact degree of inflation. I'd buy the cast album in a minute.

The show moves along at a jolly rhythm, which reflects positively upon Henry Wishcamper, the director. Sadly, however, it is Wishcamper's errors that must keep it a the amusing, rather than the sublime, level.

Apparently, it can't be stated too often that comedy must ALWAYS be played as straight as possible. The more the actor seems to believe, the funnier the audience finds it. And, conversely, when the actor joins the audience in enjoying the nonsense, a moment of fun may be had but the structure is fatally weakened.

Wishcamper lets his actors wink several times too often. To their credit, they seem reluctant. If so, they're right. And when the director quits seeing the show every performance, they might consider dumping some of the stuff like slipping moustaches or urgent whispers.

Not much can be done, however, about the stage hand whose prop-handling has been turned into part of the scene. A bad, bad idea, this mocking of illusion. Even a script as sturdy as this one can tear like tissue if the illusion is treated contemptuously.



FEATURES



John Cariani (left) as Lord Edgar, and Jeffrey Bender as Alcazar in the quick-change play running through Sept. 6.

'IT'S KIND OF RIDICULOUS'

Well, of course it is! That's why 'Irma Vep' is so much fun to perform, and to watch

By Jessica Fryman

For the Old Globe's production of "The Mystery of Irma Vep," the real puzzle just might be how two actors starring in eight roles will pull off record-fast costume changes, dialogue with themselves as two different characters and impersonate several accents.

"It's kind of ridiculous," says John Cariani, who plays four characters (two of which are women) in his Old Globe debut.

And as if you could make the actors' challenges any more difficult: They are staging the play in the round. As Cariani and Jeffrey Bender (who plays the other four roles) exit as one character and immediately return as another, they often traverse the entire stage at Copley Auditorium.

Despite the difficulties, the two say they're ready for the month-long run of the show, a gothic vampire spoof that satirizes "Rebecca" and "Wuthering Heights," among a long list of others.

The old horror-movie references are twisted throughout the play as it follows Lady Enid (Bender) while she finds out about her new husband, Lord Edgar's (Cariani) past, including his late wife, Irma Vep.

"The audiences, young and old, will get a kick out of it," says Bender, who is performing with the Old Globe for the second time. "It's two hours of craziness."

But it's not necessarily the story line that audiences will love. The show's most entertaining aspect may be the two actors' performances, director Henry Wishcamper says.

After reading the play in college, Wishcamper put "Irma Vep" on his list of things to do because of the opportunity it gives the performers.

"I love watching actors give



Jeffrey Bender (left) and John Cariani in the Old Globe's "The Mystery of Irma Vep." Craig Schwartz photos

DETAILS

"The Mystery of Irma Vep"

The Old Globe

When: Opens at 8 tonight; runs 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays, 7 p.m. Tuesdays and Wednesdays, 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; through Sept. 6

Where: Arena Stage at Copley Auditorium, 1450 El Prado

Tickets: \$29-\$59

Phone: (619) 234-5623

Online: theoldglobe.org

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Cariani and Bender say that talent didn't come without lots of practice.

In one rehearsal, Cariani started reading his Lord Edgar lines in his Jane voice.

"It was kind of embarrassing," said Cariani. "The hardest thing is remembering who you are every time you go out on stage. We go off as one character and come back 30 seconds later as another character. It's kind of fun for audiences to see that."

The show, which features men dressed as women, pop culture references from the past 50 years and lots of laughs, is well-suited for a wide variety of audiences and very gay-friendly, Wishcamper says.

"It's fun and infectious," he said. "I love the energy of it."

Jessica Fryman is a Union-Tribune intern.



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'It's kind of ridiculous'

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By Jessica Fryman

2:00 a.m. August 6, 2009

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 Theater News

Jeffrey Bender and John Cariani to Star in Old Globe's *The Mystery of Irma Vep*

By: [Brian Scott Lipton](#) · Jul 9, 2009 · San Diego

Jeffrey Bender and John Cariani will star in the Old Globe's production of Charles Ludlam's spoof *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, to play the Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art, July 31-September 6. The production will be directed by Henry Wishcamper.

In the play, in which the actors play all the characters, strange things happen when Lady Enid arrives at an estate with her new husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife.



John Cariani

The creative team includes Robin Vest (scenic design), Jenny Mannis (costume design), Jason Bieber (lighting design), and Paul Peterson (sound design). Wishcamper's credits include *Port Authhority*, *The Seafarer*, *Talking Pictures*, and *Flags*.

Bender's stage credits include *Cymbeline*, *Opus*, *The Three Musketeers* and *Jane Eyre*. Cariani earned a Tony Award nomination for *Fiddler on the Roof* and his other stage credits include *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Modern Orthodox*.

For ticket information, visit www.oldglobe.org.

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Camp, pop culture abound in 'The Mystery of Irma Vep'

BY DIANA SAENGER
Contributor

For 21 years, playwright Charles Ludlam produced plays that borrowed their subjects from other works such as gothic novels, old movies, pop culture and Shakespeare. His forte was comedy, farce and camp. Ludlam's Obie-winning 1984 gothic spoof "The Mystery of Irma Vep," classified as one of the most produced plays in America, runs at The Old Globe's Arena Stage July 31 through Sept. 6.

The story of Lady Enid and her husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife, is a satire of theatrical and film genres including melodrama, farce and the Alfred Hitchcock film "Rebecca" (1940). Part of the play's lure is that two actors play seven characters. Jeffrey Bender, who recently appeared at The Globe in "Opus," takes on the roles of Lady Enid Hillcrest, Nicodemus, Underwood, Alcazar and Pev Amri. Tony Award-nominated John Cariani will play Lord Edgar Hillcrest, Jane Twisden and an intruder.

Bender, who has a strong repertoire of physical comedy, recognized the challenge of playing camp and cross-dressing characters.

"You have to be willing to do anything on stage and have fun with it," he said. "I don't get to do camp that often, but I think physical comedy plays into camp."

In addition to a physical presence, playing a role of the opposite sex requires an actor to psychologically get into their character. Bender began his journey by working

on the dialect.

"I knew Lady Enid was going to be more of a prim and proper character, more upper-crust British, so I memorized my lines with a British cockney accent," he said.



Jeffrey Bender takes on four roles in 'The Mystery of Irma Vep.'

Director Henry Wishcamper, artistic director of Katharsis Theater Company, said his two actors are malleable professionals who will portray their many characters with ease and fun. He sees his job more about making sense of the play.

"The stakes of what's going on are extraordinarily high to the point of ridiculousness almost every moment of play," Wishcamper said. "The challenge is to create enough variation so the play doesn't become hysterical all the time. It's a tricky balance between

something that is truthful and something that is heightened to the point of being absurd."

Anyone who has seen the incredible quick-change artists on television realizes the extra challenge these actors face on the intimate round Arena Stage that is void of typical theater contraptions.

"The set, sound and costume designs are integral to this play to make it fit within the space," Wishcamper said. "Robin Vest, the scenic designer, has down a clever job of col-

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"Jenny re-creates the world of classic Hollywood of the late 1930s and early 1940s with fun costumes," Wishcamper said. "Sound is another important character in the play. Paul Peterson includes a wealth of amazing music of old classics, including Bernard Herrmann scores with the sweeping majestic romantic sounds and the crazy campy scores of the old B horror movies."

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Camp, pop culture abound in 'The Mystery of Irma Vep'

Wednesday, July 22, 2009

By Diana Saenger

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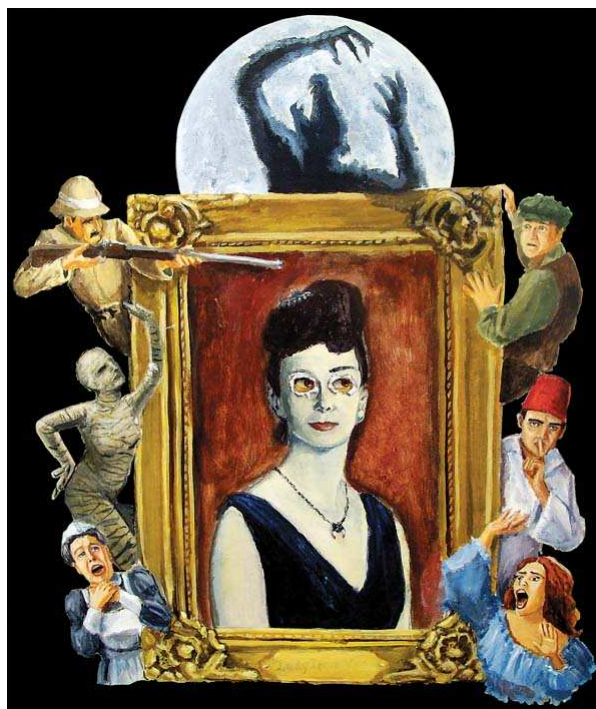
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Photo by: Courtesy

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Diana Saenger

Diana Saenger is a freelance writer for the La Jolla Light. To make comments about articles, contact talkback@lajollalight.com.

DEL MAR TIMES

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Thursday, July 23, 2009

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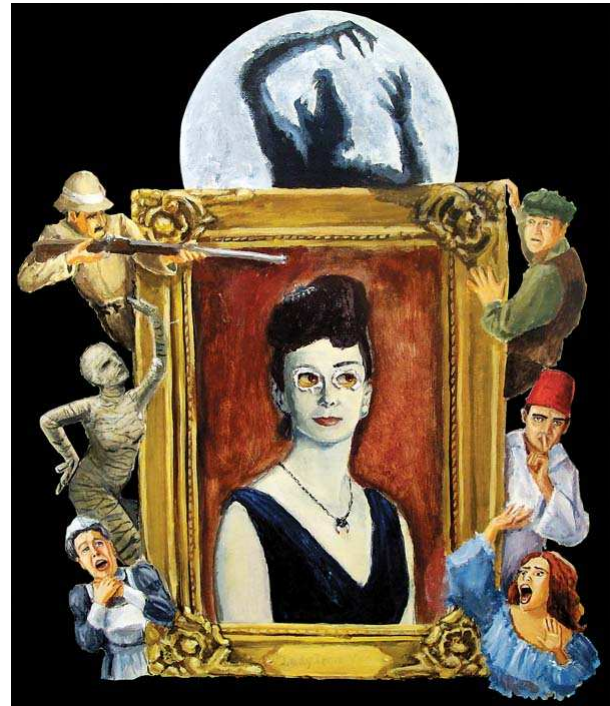
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Diana Saenger

Diana is a freelance writer for the Del Mar Times, Carmel Valley Leader, Rancho Santa Fe Record and Solana Beach Sun. Comments about Diana's articles can be sent by [e-mail](#).



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Bender and Cariani Star in Old Globe's *Mystery of Irma Vep* Starting July 31

By [Andrew Gans](#)
31 Jul 2009



John Cariani
photo by Aubrey Reuben

The Old Globe's production of Charles Ludlam's gothic spoof *The Mystery of Irma Vep* begins performances in the Globe's Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium July 31.

Directed by Henry Wishcamper, the production will officially opening Aug. 6 at 8 PM, and performances will continue through Sept. 6.

Jeffrey M. Bender (Broadway's *Cymbeline*) and John Cariani (Tony nomination for *Fiddler on the Roof*) are the "cast of thousands," taking on the roles of Lady Enid, Lord Edgar, Nicodemus Underwood – and a mummy – among others.

"On a 'dark and stormy night,'" press notes state, "Lady Enid arrives at an estate with her new husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife and haunted by something that's prowling the grounds. Strange things begin to happen around Lady Enid while the mysterious portrait of Irma Vep hanging over the fireplace gazes down upon her. *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is a hilarious comedy that satirizes everything from Alfred Hitchcock's 'Rebecca' to Victorian Melodrama to 'The Mummy's Curse.'"

The creative team also includes Robin Vest (scenic design), Jenny Mannis (costume design), Jason Bieber (lighting design), Paul Peterson (sound design) and Kathryn Davies (stage manager).

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The Old Globe is located in San Diego's Balboa Park at 1363 Old Globe Way. Tickets may be purchased online at www.TheOldGlobe.org, by phone at

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Bender and Cariani Star in Old Globe's *Mystery of Irma Vep*, Opening Aug. 6

By *Andrew Gans*
06 Aug 2009



Jeffrey M. Bender and John Cariani
photo by Craig Schwartz

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Directed by Henry Wishcamper, the production, which began previews July 31, will continue through Sept. 6.

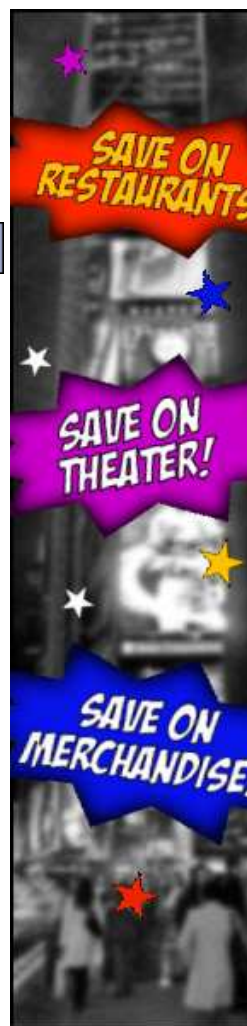
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"On a 'dark and stormy night,'" press notes state, "Lady Enid arrives at an estate with her new husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife and haunted by something that's prowling the grounds. Strange things begin to happen around Lady Enid while the mysterious portrait of Irma Vep hanging over the fireplace gazes down upon her. *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is a hilarious comedy that satirizes everything from Alfred Hitchcock's 'Rebecca' to Victorian Melodrama to 'The Mummy's Curse.'"

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John Cariani and Jeffrey M. Bender in the Old Globe's *Mystery of Irma Vep*
photo by Craig Schwartz

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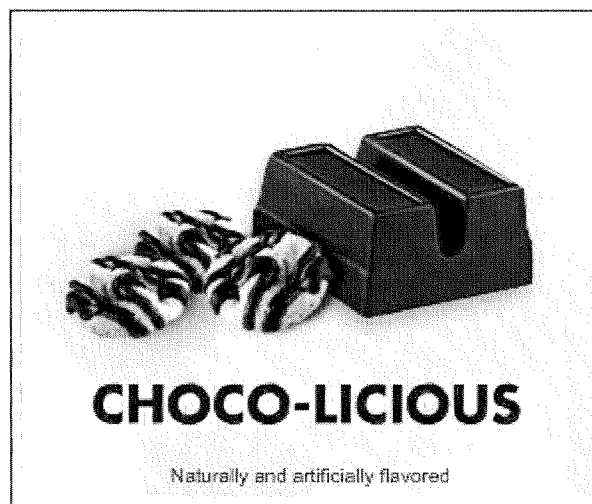


'Irma Vep', 'Cyrano', and Shakespeare Join 'First Wives' This Summer at Old Globe

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by BWV News Desk

Lou Spisto, Executive Producer of the Tony Award®-winning Old Globe, has announced the Theatre's complete 2009 Summer Season. As previously announced, the world premiere of *The First Wives Club – A New Musical*, book by Rupert Holmes, music and lyrics by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland, directed by Francesca Zambello, will run in the Old Globe Theatre July 15 – August 16, 2009. The Arena Theatre at the San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium will host Charles Ludlam's hilarious gothic play, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, directed by Henry Wishcamper, to run August 1 – September 6, 2009.



In the Lowell Davies Festival Theatre, the Globe will present two works of Shakespeare productions: *Twelfth Night* and *Henry VIII*, along with Edmond Rostand's celebrated classic, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The three productions will be performed in nightly rotation in the Globe's outdoor Lowell Davies Festival Theatre June 13 – September 27, 2009. Globe Resident Artistic Director Darko Tresnjak will once again oversee the Festival and direct *Henry VIII* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*, while Festival favorite Paul Mullins (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Measure for Measure*) will direct *Twelfth Night*.

For more information or to subscribe to The Old Globe's 2009 Summer Season, please contact Globe Ticket Services at (619) 23-GLOBE or visit www.TheOldGlobe.org.

"In this sixth season after reinstituting the repertory format, as the Shakespeare Festival nears its 75th anniversary in 2010, we have chosen to break with recent practice and, as do many other major Shakespeare Festivals, again produce classical works, important revivals and sometimes contemporary plays in repertory with the works of Shakespeare as part of the Festival. *Cyrano* is a play that fits this mission perfectly; and along with *Twelfth Night* and *Henry VIII* performed by a company of nearly thirty, complemented by a world premiere musical headed to Broadway and a hilarious satire that is already a modern classic, summer 2009 is going to be one joyous time for both our audiences and artists," said Spisto. "We are particularly delighted that the repertory format has been so popular with audiences and that the past several seasons led by our resident artistic director, Darko Tresnjak, a company of actors, directors and designers have brought San Diego and the region consistently excellent productions. Adding the "non" Shakespeare may not be something we do every year but we have been planning this change for a while and it is particularly timely as we set the stage for the 2010 anniversary—so stay tuned!"

Set in Paris in 1640, Cyrano de Bergerac is a classic tale of romance and tragedy. Talented poet, swordsman and Cadet in the French army, Cyrano falls in love with the beautiful Roxane but lacks the confidence to reveal his true feelings due to his abnormally large nose. Resigned to his loss, Cyrano offers to help his fellow soldier Christian win her affections by writing love letters on his behalf. Roxane falls in love with author of the letters not realizing it is Cyrano. His tender verse gives voice to the inarticulate, dashing Christian, gaining him her heart just before both men depart for war. This classic romantic story is laced with swagger, gallantry and sacrifice, and some of the most beautiful verse ever written.

One of the Bard's most beloved comedies, Twelfth Night centers on the beautiful heroine Viola, shipwrecked in a strange land. She disguises herself as the boy "Cesario" and works her way into the court of Duke Orsino. Impressed by this articulate and handsome young man, Orsino sends Cesario to woo Lady Olivia on the Duke's behalf, but Cesario speaks so eloquently that Olivia is soon smitten – not with the Duke, but with Cesario. Meanwhile Viola has fallen in love with Orsino and finds herself, along with an entire comic entourage, entangled in a web of disguises, mistaken identities and misplaced affections.

Henry VIII ascended to the throne as a lithe, handsome 17-year-old and died after an extraordinary 38-year reign, an embittered, obese invalid. Desperate for a male heir, Henry casts aside the older, but loyal, Katharine of Aragon for a series of marriages with wives – the determined temptress Anne Boleyn, the pious yet tragic Jane Seymour, the outcast Anne of Cleves, the adulterous Katherine Howard and finally the devoted Katherine Parr. Full of Tudor splendor and pageantry, Henry VIII depicts the sexual intrigue, betrayal and rivalry that existed within his court, in a reign notable for its political and religious upheaval, violence and corruption.

Spisto continued. "Darko and I are delighted to bring Paul Mullins back for his third production at The Globe. Paul has been an important part of the success of The Shakespeare Festival and we are all looking forward to his take on Twelfth Night next summer."

In Charles Ludlam's hilarious Obie Award-winning play, The Mystery of Irma Vep, Lady Enid, newly married to the controversial Lord Edgar, arrives at his castle estate on a "dark and stormy night" under the spell of his deceased first wife and haunted by something prowling the moors. She quickly encounters a werewolf, a vampire, an Egyptian princess and the mystery of Irma Vep, whose portrait hangs over the fireplace. This hilarious, tongue-in-cheek production celebrates and skewers such classics as "Rebecca," Wuthering Heights," "Jane Eyre," and The Raven" in a fun-filled evening. With dozens of lightning-fast changes, two actors portray all the roles – men, women and monsters – in this hilarious tour-de-farce.

"Spisto added, "I am thrilled that Henry Wishcamper has accepted my invitation to make his directorial debut at the Globe next summer. I was very impressed with his work on his acclaimed production of Connor McPherson's Port Authority earlier this year. He is a wonderful addition to the growing list of the next generation of nationally recognized directors at The Globe."

Based on the best-selling novel and Hollywood blockbuster of the same name, The First Wives Club – A New Musical is a thrilling, Broadway-bound production, featuring a book by Tony winner Rupert Holmes (Curtains!, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Say Goodnight Gracie) and a score by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier and Eddie Holland, the threesome who created hits for Martha and The Vandellas, The Miracles, Marvin Gaye, The Four Tops and The Supremes. The production will be directed by award winning opera and theatrical director Francesca Zambello (The Little Mermaid for Disney on Broadway, Little House on the Prairie for the Guthrie Theatre, Rebecca at the Vienna Raimund Theatre and recently, Porgy and Bess and the Wagner Ring Cycle at the San Francisco Opera where she is the Artistic Advisor. Ms Zambello has won three

Olivier Awards and has credits at The Metropolitan Opera, Teatro alla Scala, Royal Albert Hall, Bolshoi, Paris Opera, The Kennedy Center and the Chicago Lyric.) The popular 1996 film "The First Wives Club" — about three divorced women who seek revenge on their former husbands — was based on Olivia Goldsmith's novel and featured a screenplay by Robert Harling. The motion picture grossed over \$130 million and boasted a star-studded cast comprising Bette Midler, Goldie Hawn and Diane Keaton.

The internationally-acclaimed, Tony Award® -winning Old Globe is one of the most renowned regional theatres in the country and has stood as San Diego's flagship arts institution for 72 years. The Old Globe produces a year-round season of 15 plays and musicals on its three stages, including its highly-regarded Shakespeare festival. The Globe has become a gathering place for leading theatre artists from around the world, such as Tom Stoppard, Daniel Sullivan and Chita Rivera, among many others. Numerous Broadway-bound premieres and revivals, such as Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, The Full Monty and Damn Yankees, have been developed at The Old Globe and have gone on to enjoy highly successful runs in New York and at regional theatres across the country.

The Globe's 2008 Summer Season includes the renowned Summer Shakespeare Festival, featuring Romeo and Juliet, The Merry Wives of Windsor and All's Well That Ends Well playing in repertory; The Pleasure of His Company; and Donald Margulies' Sight Unseen. Under the leadership of Executive Producer Louis G. Spisto and Resident Artistic Director Darko Tresnjak, the Globe is at the forefront of the nation's leading performing arts organizations, setting a standard for excellence in American theatre.

Artist Biographies

One of America's most popular and prolific "pop" songwriting teams ever, the hits of Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Eddie Holland have received over 100 million airplays on radio and television. Their songs have had an indelible influence on the international music scene and have been a part of the fabric of our lives for over four decades. Their body of work has been recorded by Rod Stewart, Michael Jackson, James Taylor, Marvin Gaye, The Dixie Chicks, The Supremes, Martha and the Vandellas, The Four Tops, The Isley Brothers, Freda Payne, The Carpenters, Barbara Streisand, Reba McEntire, The Temptations, Dionne Warwick, The Jackson Five and The Beatles to name just a few. They were inducted in the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1988; into the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame in 1990; they received the National Association of Recording Artists and Science Trustee Award; and were recently honored with the BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc) "ICON" award.

Rupert Holmes is the author of numerous songs, musicals, plays and novels, which have earned him three Tony awards (best book, best score and best musical), several Drama Desk awards, and the prestigious Edgar Award, which was given to him by the Mystery Writers of America. He has developed and arranged songs for many renowned artists, including Barbra Streisand, Dolly Parton, Barry Manilow, Paul Williams, the Manhattan Transfer and Barbara Cook. His Solitary, which starred Stacey Keach, set a new box office record at the Kennedy Center. Other notable theatrical projects include the Tony Award-Winning, The Mystery of Edwin Drood, the Tony-nominated Say Goodnight Gracie, The Accomplice, Goosebumps and Marty. His latest show, Curtains, a Kander and Ebb musical, recently played to major acclaim on Broadway. He also received an Emmy for his made-for-television dramedy, "Remember WENN," and more recently his novel, Where The Truth Lies, has been translated into a major motion picture starring Kevin Bacon.

Charles Ludlam was an American actor, director, playwright and founder of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company in New York City. His works include Big Hotel (1967), Conquest of the Universe, or When Queens Collide (1968), Turds in Hell, an adaptation of The Satyricon (1969),

The Grand Tarot (1969), Bluebeard, an adaptation of H. G. Wells's The Island of Dr Moreau (1970), Eunuchs of the Forbidden City (1971), Corn (1972) Camille (1973), Stage Blood, an adaptation of Hamlet (1975), Caprice (1976), Der Ring Gott Farblonjet, an adaptation of The Ring Cycle, The Ventriloquist's Wife, Utopia, Incorporated, The Enchanted Pig, Elephant Woman, A Christmas Carol, Reverse Psychology (1980), Love's Tangled Web (1981), Secret Lives of the Sexists, Exquisite Torture, Galas (1983), inspired by the life of Maria Callas, The Artificial Jungle (1986), How to Write a Play.

Paul Mullins directed the Globe's acclaimed Shakespeare Festival productions of The Merry Wives of Windsor (2008), Measure for Measure (2007) and Macbeth (2005). He is a company member of the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, where he has directed and performed for 14 seasons. His production of King John for the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival was named one of the Top Ten Productions of 2003 by New Jersey's Star Ledger, which called the piece "a self-contained stunner." Mr. Mullins' productions have been seen at The Juilliard School, Portland Stage, American Stage, the Yale School of Drama, and the Academy of Classical Acting.

Globe Executive Producer Lou Spisto has led The Old Globe since October, 2002. During his tenure, Spisto spearheaded the return of the Globe's Shakespeare Repertory Season and brought to the Globe several new musicals, including the recent critically-acclaimed John Doyle and Harvey Fierstein collaboration, A Catered Affair, the launch of the national tour of the Tony Award-winning Avenue Q and the Broadway transfers Chita Rivera: The Dancer's Life, the Twyla Tharp/Bob Dylan musical, THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'. He has produced over 75 plays and musicals, including Dirty Rotten Scoundrels, the west coast premiere of the Tony Award-winning play Take Me Out and the Globe's annual holiday favorite, Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas!. Spisto has managed the Globe's Capital Campaign to raise \$75 million by the Theatre's 75th anniversary in 2010. Launched in March, 2006, the campaign has reached 85% of its goal to date. During the past four seasons, the organization has grown its subscription audience an unprecedented amount, resulting in the highest level of attendance in over a decade. The Globe was also recognized by Charity Navigator, America's premiere charity evaluator, which recently gave the Globe its third consecutive 4-Star rating. A strong advocate of arts education, Spisto initiated several new programs including an innovative cross-border program involving students from both San Diego and Tijuana in a unique bilingual production of Romeo and Juliet. He also launched a free matinee series which brings thousands of students to the Globe's productions. Spisto established a reputation as a superb arts executive here in California, where he spent over ten years as the Executive Director of the Pacific Symphony Orchestra in Orange County. During his tenure there, he tripled the orchestra's annual budget, while eliminating a prior deficit and successfully completing the orchestra's first endowment campaign. In addition, he established a series of innovative recording projects with Sony Classical and oversaw a number of nationally recognized commissioning projects. He also served as the chief executive at both American Ballet Theatre and The Detroit Symphony. He holds a Masters degree from the University of Wisconsin in Arts Administration and a Bachelors of Business Administration from the University of Notre Dame, and spent many years directing, producing and as an actor in plays and musicals throughout his college and graduate school years, as well as in professional summer theatre.

Globe Resident Artistic Director and Artistic Director of the Globe's 2004-2008 Shakespeare Festivals, Darko Tresnjak's directorial credits at the Globe include: The Pleasure of His Company, All's Well That Ends Well, Bell, Book and Candle, Hamlet, Pericles, The Two Noble Kinsmen, Antony and Cleopatra, The Winter's Tale, The Comedy of Errors, A Midsummer Night's Dream and Titus Andronicus. Other credits include The Merchant of Venice at the Royal Shakespeare Company and Theatre for a New Audience, All's Well That Ends Well, Antony and Cleopatra at Theatre for a New Audience; The Two Noble Kinsmen at The Public Theatre; Princess Turandot and Hotel Universe at Blue Light Theater Company; More Lies About Jerzy at the Vineyard Theater Company; The Skin of Our Teeth, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, The Winter's Tale, Under Milk Wood, Moving Picture, The Blue Demon, Princess Turandot and

The Love of Three Oranges at [Williamstown Theatre Festival](#); Heartbreak House, What the Butler Saw, Amphitryon and The Blue Demon at the Huntington Theatre; Hay Fever and Princess Turandot at Westport Country Playhouse; The Two Noble Kinsmen at [Chicago Shakespeare Theatre](#); Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead at Long Wharf Theater; A Little Night Music, Amour at [Goodspeed Opera House](#); and La Dispute at UCSD. His opera credits include the American premiere of Victor Ullmann's Der Zerbrochene Krug and Alexander Zemlinsky's Der Zwerg at [Los Angeles Opera](#); Die Zauberflöte at Opera Theater of St. Louis; Orfeo ed Euridice, Il Trovatore and Turandot at Virginia Opera; Turandot at Opera Carolina; Il Barbieri di Siviglia Florida Grand Opera; Die Zauberflöte, Florentine Opera Company; La Traviata, Der Fliegende Hollander, Die Fledermaus, and the American premiere of May Night at Sarasota Opera. He is the recipient of the [Alan Schneider](#) Award for Directing Excellence, TCG National Theater Artist Residency Award, Boris Sagal Directing Fellowship, NEA New Forms Grant, two Pennsylvania Council on the Arts Individual Artist Fellowships, two San Diego Critics Circle Awards for his direction of Pericles and The Winter's Tale, and two Patté Awards for his direction of The Winter's Tale and Titus Andronicus. He has performed with numerous Philadelphia dance and theater companies and toured across the United States and Japan with the UNIMA Award-winning Mum Puppettheatre. He was educated at Swarthmore College and Columbia University. Upcoming projects include Walter Braunfels' The Birds at the [Los Angeles Opera](#), conducted by James Conlon.

Henry Wishcamper's recent directing credits include [Conor McPherson's](#) Port Authority ([Atlantic Theater Company](#)) and The Seafarer (Hartford TheaterWorks), Lanford Wilson's The Mound Builders (Julliard), Horton Foote's Talking Pictures ([Goodman Theatre](#)), the New York premiere of [Jane Martin's](#) Flags (59e59), Doug Grissom's Elvis People (New World Stages), his own play The Polish Play, A Conflation of Macbeth by [William Shakespeare](#) and Ubu Roi by Alfred Jarry (Katharsis Theater Company), [Thornton Wilder's](#) Pullman Car Hiawatha (Keen Company; Drama Desk Nomination for Outstanding Revival of a Play), Scott Blumenthal's So Frightful... (McGinn/Cazale Theater; commissioned by the Maine Humanities Council), [Conor McPherson's](#) The Good Thief (Portland Stage Company), Moliere's The Flying Doctor and The Imaginary Cuckold (Roundtable Ensemble), and [John Ford's](#) 'Tis Pity She's a Whore (HERE). He served as the assistant director on the Broadway productions of [August: Osage County](#) (directed by [Anna D. Shapiro](#)), [Shining City](#) (directed by [Robert Falls](#)), [Absurd Person Singular](#) (directed by [John Tillinger](#)) and [Match](#) (directed by [Nicholas Martin](#)). Henry is the Artistic Director of Katharsis Theater Company. He also served as the Artistic Director of the Maine Summer Dramatic Institute in Portland, Maine from 1997-1999 and as the Artistic Associate of Keen Company from 2002-2005. He is a Drama League Directing Fellow.

[Francesca Zambello](#) is an internationally recognized and award-winning opera and theater director. Her recent theatrical credits include [The Little Mermaid](#) for Disney on Broadway, Little House on the Prairie for the Guthrie Theater, Rebecca for the Vienna Raimund Theater, [West Side Story](#) for the floating stage in Bergenz, Austria, and Showboat at The Royal [Albert Hall](#). She is the Artistic Advisor of the San Francisco Opera where she is helming a new Ring Cycle and Porgy and Bess this season. She has many notable directing credits at Metropolitan Opera, including An American Tragedy, Cyrano and Les Troyens, as well as at Teatro alla Scala, Royal [Albert Hall](#), Bolshoi, Royal Opera House, Paris Opera, Washington Opera, and Chicago Lyric, among others. Her honors include three Olivier Awards, two Evening Standard Awards, two French Grand Prix des Critiques, Helpmann Award, Palme d'Or in Germany and the Golden Mask in Russia.



There is a mystery to be solved in [The Old Globe](#)'s production of [The Mystery of Irma Vep](#). Can you crack it?

The questions go beyond the title character, Irma. How many actors are in the show? What number of characters do they play – man, woman or other? How often do they change from one character to another? How many classic, gothic, horror, and Hollywood movies can those characters spoof in one stage show?

We can answer some of those questions in this report. You'll have to witness the show firsthand to solve some of the other mysteries. And still a few questions may never be deciphered in this hilarious whodunit.

The story starts on a "dark and stormy night," as Lady Enid arrives at an estate with her new husband – Lord Edgar Hillcrest, no relation to the local neighborhood – who is under the spell of his deceased first wife – Irma, of course – and haunted by something that's prowling the grounds. Following the clues so far? Strange things begin to happen around the new Lady of the house while the mystifying portrait of Irma hanging over the fireplace gazes down upon her.



"The main story is that Lord Hillcrest, who is the head of this English Manor house, has brought home a new wife," further explains Henry Wishcamper, the director of this [Charles Ludlam](#) comedy. "Their honeymoon period is interrupted by a vampire that may – or may not – be Lord Hillcrest's first wife, Irma Vep."

Another clue.

“So the principle characters are Lord Edgar Hillcrest and Lady Enid,” Wishcamper continues. “Plus there is their servant Jane, who is a very uptight housekeeper, and Nicodemus, who is a hunchbacked stable boy.”

Four characters so far, for those keeping notes. Five, if you count in Irma. In total, actors Jeffrey M. Bender and John Cariani play a “cast of thousands,” taking on the four main roles and a collection of supporting roles – plus a mummy. Yes, add a mummy to the list.

“The two play a total of 10 characters,” Wishcamper confesses.

“I can tell you I am playing four characters, but I can’t tell you who they are because I don’t want to give anything away,” Cariani admitted, answering questions after a recent rehearsal. “I can say I play a woman, but I am not a very pretty woman – which is kind of hard on my ego. Neither is Jeff (Bender), though.”

Bender and Cariani switch back and forth between roles with lightning speed, a trick that can be just as entertaining as the plot.

“The show is described as a full-length quick-change act,” Wishcamper says. “It’s two men that play all the rolls in the play, both men and women. They leave the stage as one character and return quickly as another character.”



How fast this change happens is still unclear, even as the director and actors approach opening night. “I’m not sure. I would have to look it up in the script,” Cariani says. It can be as fast as one line of text. Sometimes they have scenes with themselves (off stage) and change characters instantly.

“To make the show more complicated, we’re doing the show in the round,” Wishcamper explains. Most theatres in the round (an audience on all sides of the stage) have four entrances. The current Globe stage – which is temporary housed in the Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art’s James S. Copley Auditorium while a new permanent facility is being built – only has two entrances, each on opposite sides of the stage. “They exit through one door and enter through another door, which necessitates them crossing all the way around the entire theatre while changing clothes at the same time.”

“I know it takes us about 20 seconds of so to run from one exit to the other entrance, and the change is done on the other side. It doesn’t give you much time to do the costume change,” Cariani continues.

Cariani and Bender started early in develop the personalities of each character, thanks to the assistance of a Dialect Coach. They both started with where the characters live vocally, and how to differentiate them through how they spoke.

“Sometimes, they switch characters when they are on stage. Sometimes, they switch characters when they are off stage. So, the vocal portrayal is very important to the audiences’ understanding,” Wishcamper explained of the early rehearsals.

“She (the Dialect Coach) made the great suggestion that we figure out how each of our characters would laugh,” Cariani recalls. “Finding out how each of the characters laugh – and I’m not going to tell you who they are – has helped a lot.”

Cariani continues to talk about his vocal training, slipping in suspicious indications of the characters he plays. “One of the funniest thing is Jane, the woman servant I play, has a lower voice than Lord Hillcrest, the man I play. We decided to make Jane a ridged, frigid woman.”

Did you pick up the clues? In contrast, Bender plays Lady Enid Hillcrest and the hunchback, Nicodemus. The two started to complete their roles once they added costumes. “Both of them, seeing what their costumes were going to be and putting the costume on in fittings, really helped them find where these characters live physically.”

Still, the results have not been perfect, at least not in rehearsal.

“I think every time they run off stage, they have a split second panic of ‘Who am I next?’” Wishcamper says.



“That happened the other day (during rehearsal),” Cariani confirms the director’s comments. “Jeff came on to do a scene and he said, ‘I have no idea what I am doing. I have no idea what line I am supposed to say.’ Today it happened to me. I walked out, and I said ‘I know I am supposed to be here, but I have no idea what scene I am supposed to do.’”

That craziness is part of the fun of watching the show, but still has its limits.

“It should appear like it is fast and frantic, but it can’t be done that way. The more frantic we are, the worse this play is,” Cariani says, explaining, “It has to look like it’s frantic, but it has to be really controlled.”

“My hope is that whatever happens on stage seems effortless and easy, and as an audience member, you have a sense of how frenetic everything is back stage in order to create that ease on stage,” Wishcamper adds.

How many changes? How many costumes? How many times? The evidence is still inconclusive. The estimate is 20-30 costumes for the 10 characters in the show, but “probably more,” Wishcamper discloses. Cariani cannot even begin to count how many times he and Bender swap parts, but Wishcamper guesses around 50 times.

“It’s an old vaudeville routine. It’s a lot of antics,” the director says. “They go through a whole sequence of vampire and old Hollywood movie spoofs.”

The Mystery of Irma Vep satirizes everything from Alfred Hitchcock’s [Rebecca](#) to Victorian Melodrama to [The Mummy’s Curse](#). How many spoofs?

“There are multiple vampires, there is a mummy that comes to life, there is a werewolf,” Wishcamper hints. “There are enough stories in this play to fill six or seven in this shows. They are pulled directly from 1930s and 40s Hollywood movies and they are all perfectly recognizable. They feel very familiar and almost like old friends before you even know who they are.”

Did you catch that clue? Add a werewolf to the list of suspects.

“It’s the coolest derived play that I have ever been a part of it. It takes stock characters and situations we know from horror

movies and replays them and then turns them on their ear,” Cariani adds. “It’s scary and hilarious, and spectacular in the true sense of the word because it is a spectacle.”

Part of the spectacle is not just watching the two actors rotate through their cast of thousands, but also the spooky effects and booby-traps throughout the intimate set. It’ll take a keen detective’s eye to catch them all.

“The set has it’s own character. The costumes have their own character,” Wishcamper says. “There are a lot of low-tech theatrical special effects in our show that are a lot of fun, which are part of the spirit of the play.”

Spirits? Another clue, or just a tease to mislead you?

“Very little of this play makes sense,” Cariani says, backing up his claim with the fact the show was originally produced by the Ridiculous Theater Company. “There are red herrings at every turn. You think it’s going to be this, than this, than this – but they (the characters) keep misleading you. Then you realize you haven’t been led anywhere. That’s the fun of it actually.”

The mystery of Irma Vep can still be solved, if your detective skills are up to par. “The rest of the play is just ridiculous.” Either way, Cariani says, “I think the audience is going to have the best time.”

The Mystery of Irma Vep

Presented by The Old Globe

Aug. 6 – Sept. 6 (with previews before opening night)

Tickets: \$29-\$59

1363 Old Globe Way (in Balboa Park)

Box office: (619) 23-GLOBE (234-5623)

Online: TheOldGlobe.org

- All photos by [Craig Schwartz](#), courtesy of The Old Globe.

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SDJJ | what's goin' on

by eileen sondak

so much to see, so little time

August is always a busy month on the entertainment calendar, with outdoor shows in full swing, San Diego Pops bringing its eclectic summer mix of music to the alfresco environment of Embarcadero Marina South and indoor theatrical productions lighting up almost every theater in town.

The Old Globe's "The First Wives Club" continues to delight audiences on the Globe's Main Stage in its world premiere. The new Broadway-bound musical (based on the hit movie and Olivia Goldsmith's best-selling novel) is funny, moving and empowering, as it tells the story of former college friends uniting for their middle-age reunion. But as director Francesca Zambello points out, the show is not just a copy of the movie. It focuses on three couples — one Jewish, one African-American and one white Protestant. The show looks like a sure-fire hit, with two Tony Award-winners (Adriane Lenox and Karen Ziemba) in the exciting cast and a high-voltage score. See it here by Aug. 23. After that, it's off to the Great White Way!

The Globe's temporary second stage at the nearby Museum of Art will feature the Obie Award-winning "The Mystery of Irma Vep" through Sept. 6. This gothic satire is a hilarious tongue-in-cheek romp, with two actors portraying multiple roles and performing lightning-quick changes. The campy classic spoofs everything from Victorian melodrama to Hitchcock and was once the most produced play in America.

Meanwhile, the Globe's Festival Stage is going strong with three plays in rotating repertory on the tree-lined outdoor stage. Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" (one of the Bard's most beloved comedies) and "Coriolanus" (one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies) will rotate with Edmond Rostand's romantic tragedy "Cyrano de Bergerac" throughout the summer. Paul Mullins directed "Twelfth Night," and with his usual wit and passion for physical comedy, Mullins has made this staging a sidesplitting romp.

Broadway veteran Patrick Page, whose comic tour de force in

"Twelfth Night" brings down the house, makes a brilliant title character in "Cyrano." Also among the talented repertory company are Charles Janasz, Celeste Ciulla, Grant Goodman and Eric Hoffman. The outdoor Festival runs through Sept. 27.

La Jolla Playhouse (with new managing director Michael Rosenberg at the helm) is starting the month off with "Herringbone," a solo musical that will dominate the Potiker Theatre Aug. 1-30. Set in the Great Depression, this black comedy stars BD Wong in a virtuoso piece that includes music and vaudeville-style tap dancing.

Alfred Hitchcock's "The 39 Steps" will take over the Mandell Weiss Theatre for a month-long run beginning Aug. 11. This charming and high-energy whodunit is frothy, laugh-packed and overflowing with zany characters (all played by a cast of four), and it contains every legendary scene from the vintage movie. Expect a dash of Monty Python stirred into the pot of this madcap comedy (direct from Broadway).

Summer Pops brings Cirque de la Symphonie to its outdoor venue Aug. 1 to start the month off with a bang. "Broadway Today" comes our way Aug. 7-8, and Pops goes classical with "A Night in Italy" Aug.

■ **Look for Bernadette Peters to bring her multi-award-winning artistry to this year's "Symphony at Salk." This annual concert under the stars returns to the Salk Institute's oceanfront courtyard Aug. 22.**

BD Wong brings down the house in the solo musical "Herringbone," at the Potiker Theatre Aug. 1-30.

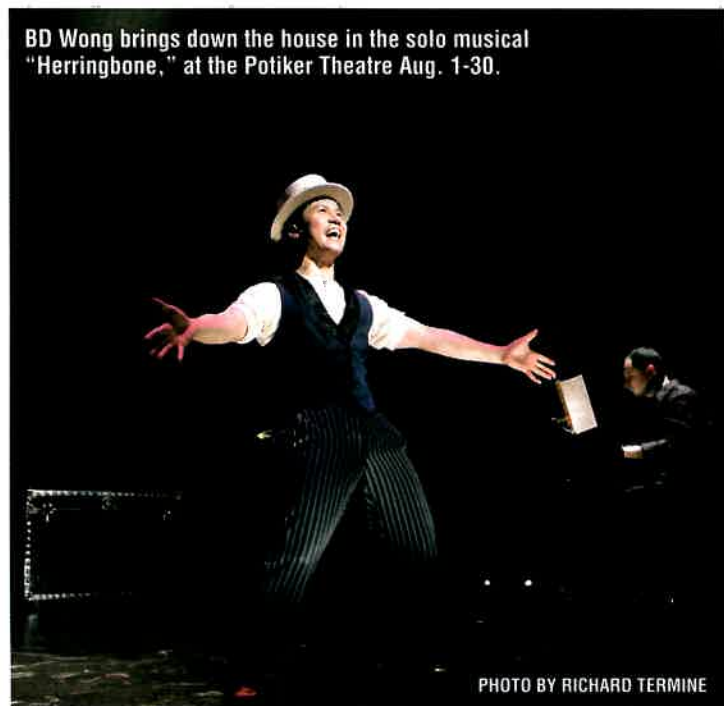


PHOTO BY RICHARD TERMINE



SDJJ | what's goin' on



“The Mystery of Irma Vep,” once the most produced play in America, continues to entertain at the Globe’s temporary second stage at the Museum of Art through Sept. 6.

9. A classical mystery tour arrives Aug. 14-15, followed Aug. 16 by an evening of Burt Bacharach. Jose Feliciano makes a guest appearance Aug. 21-22, and “The Music of the Doors” rings out on the Embarcadero Aug. 27. Melissa Manchester rounds out the month’s music making Aug. 28-29 with her Grammy Award-winning songs.

Look for Bernadette Peters to bring her multi-award-winning artistry to this year’s “Symphony at Salk.” This annual concert under the stars returns to the Salk Institute’s oceanfront courtyard Aug. 22. Maestro Thomas Wilkins will lead the San Diego Symphony orchestra on this special evening (which includes a champagne reception and boxed supper).

The Welk Resort Theatre’s production of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” is the perfect choice for family entertainment this summer. Welk’s stunning staging of the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical features an outstanding cast, elaborate costumes, sets and lighting designs and a very clever mix of tongue-in-cheek humor, song and dance. “Joseph...” is one of the best productions Welk has ever done, so take the

kids to see this musical telling the biblical tale before it ends its run Aug. 30. Enjoy a lavish buffet prior to every performance (and there are several matinees each week). Kids 15 and under can see the show for just \$10 (without a meal).

Broadway-San Diego’s touring production of “Wicked” is settled in at the Civic Theatre through Aug. 30, but even with its extended run, “Wicked” — winner of 20 major awards — may well be a hard ticket to come by. Not surprisingly, the show (with its inventive take on the witches of Oz) has been a sell-out across the country.

CCT returns to the flight deck of the USS Midway for its production of “Let Freedom Ring.” This new musical will board the aircraft carrier Aug. 21 for a spectacular run through Aug. 30, paying tribute to the armed forces. The historic ship, now a museum based in San Diego, has new comfortable seating.

SummerFest 2009 is busily ensconced at Sherwood Auditorium this month. The La Jolla Music Society will feature about 70 world-class artists and ensembles performing 13 concerts by the time it closes Aug. 23. Watch for the return of the Composer Series, exploring the music of Felix Mendelssohn (starting Aug. 4), and a virtuoso series opening with pianist Menahem Pressler Aug. 5, among other highlights. A free outdoor concert at La Jolla Cove is slated for Aug. 13, and the SummerFest Gala is coming up Aug. 14, with Jay and Lael Kovtun as honorary chairs.

Moonlight kicked off its summer season and inaugurated its new Stage House with “42nd Street,” a lively musical comedy that closes Aug. 1. Next on tap for Moonlight is “Phantom,” the Kopit/Yeston version of “The Phantom of the Opera.” “Phantom” opens Aug. 12 and runs through Aug. 29 at Moonlight’s outdoor amphitheater in Vista.

The Lamb’s Players is finally ready to unveil the San Diego premiere of “Leaving Iowa.” The nostalgic play takes over the Lamb’s Coronado location Aug. 7 for a month-long run. Meanwhile, the Lamb’s Horton Grand Theatre venue is featuring “Godspell,” a lively musical from the creator of “Wicked.”

Lotus Theatre Collective is offering “The Complete Works of William Shakespeare (Abridged)” Aug. 6-29. Performances are

scheduled for Swedenborg Hall in San Diego.

North Coast Repertory Theatre ended its regular season, but the theater school is producing its 13th Annual Summer Shakespeare production. “Julius Caesar” will enjoy a brief run in Solana Beach Aug. 20-23.

San Diego Junior Theatre is presenting the school edition of “Les Miserables” at its Casa del Prado location through Aug. 9. It’s recommended for kids 10 and older, but adults should love this musical masterpiece.

The San Diego Natural History Museum’s “Body Worlds and The Brain — Our Three Pound Gem: The Original Exhibition of Real Human Bodies” remains on view, intriguing visitors with its raw power. The giant-screen film, “Human Body: Pushing the Limits — Brain Power” will be shown until Oct. 4. “Fossil Mysteries” (from dinosaurs to mammoths) is a permanent exhibition at the museum.

The Museum of Art is still showcasing its new acquisitions and long-held strengths. The space changes regularly, so you’re encouraged to return often to see new rotations of this ongoing exhibition. “Oceanic Art: A Celebration of Form,” featuring 97 works primarily from Melanesia and Polynesia, is firmly entrenched at the museum until January 2010. “Richard Avedon: Portraits of Power” will be on view through Sept. 6, and Calder Jewelry just opened at the museum, where it will remain through Jan. 3.

Also on tap this month at the museum is a “Family Drop-in Day” Aug. 16, featuring child-friendly tours and art making. The Target Free Family Day and Festival is slated for Aug. 20, and a screening of “Funny Face” is set for Aug. 20 at the Hibben Gallery.

The Da Vinci Experience is offering San Diegans a spectacular look at the creative genius of the world’s true Renaissance man, Leonardo Da Vinci. The San Diego Air and Space Museum is featuring this special exhibit, which includes 12 reproductions of his artistic masterpieces and 60 precise and interactive replicas of the amazing devices Da Vinci developed more than 500 years ago. Da Vinci had an incredible body of accomplishments, and this fascinating exhibition lets us marvel at many of them in one visit. The show will be ensconced at the Air and Space Museum until January 2010. ☆



Photo Flash: THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP, Starring Bender And Cariani At The Old Globe

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by BWW News Desk

[The Old Globe](#)'s production of Charles Ludlam's gothic spoof, *The Mystery of Irma Vep* stars Jeffrey M. Bender and [John Cariani](#) are a "cast of thousands," taking on the roles of Lady Enid, Lord Edgar, Nicodemus Underwood - and a mummy - among many others. Directed by [Henry Wishcamper](#). *The Mystery of Irma Vep* will run in the Globe's Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium July 31 - Sept. 6, 2009. Low-priced previews are available from July 31 - Aug. 5. Opening night is Aug. 6 at 8:00 p.m. Tickets may be purchased online at www.TheOldGlobe.org, by phone at (619) 23-GLOBE or by visiting the Box Office.



Ludlam's Obie-winning farce has enjoyed a run as one of the most-produced plays in America. On a "dark and stormy night," Lady Enid arrives at an estate with her new husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife and haunted by something that's prowling the grounds. Strange things begin to happen around Lady Enid while the mysterious portrait of Irma Vep hanging over the fireplace gazes down upon her. *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is a hilarious comedy that satirizes everything from [Alfred Hitchcock](#)'s *Rebecca* to Victorian Melodrama to *The Mummy's Curse*.

The creative team includes [Robin Vest](#) (scenic design), [Jenny Mannis](#) (costume design), Jason Bieber (lighting design), Paul Peterson (sound design) and Kathryn Davies (stage manager).

Tickets to *The Mystery of Irma Vep* can be purchased online at www.TheOldGlobe.org, by phone at (619) 23-GLOBE or by visiting the box office at 1363 Old Globe Way in Balboa Park. Performances begin on July 31 and continue through Sept. 6. Ticket prices range from \$29 to \$59. Low-priced preview performances are available from July 31 to Aug. 5. Performance times: Previews: Friday, July 31 at 8:00 p.m., Sunday Aug. 1 at 2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m., Tuesday, Aug. 4 and Wednesday, Aug. 5 at 7:00 p.m. Regular Performances: Tuesday and Wednesday evenings at 7:00 p.m., Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings at 8:00 p.m., Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2:00 p.m., and Sunday evenings at 7:00 p.m. Discounts are available for full-time students, patrons 29 years of age and under, educators, seniors and groups of 10 or more.

[The Old Globe](#) is located in San Diego's Balboa Park at 1363 Old Globe Way. There are numerous free parking lots available throughout the park. Valet parking is also available (\$10). For additional parking information visit www.BalboaPark.org.

The Tony Award-winning Old Globe is one of the country's leading professional regional theaters and has stood as San Diego's flagship arts institution for 74 years. Under the direction of Executive Producer [Louis G. Spisto](#), [The Old Globe](#) produces a year-round season of 15 productions of classic, contemporary and new works on its three Balboa Park stages: the 580-seat [Old Globe Theatre](#), the 250-seat Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium (an interim second stage during construction of the new 280-seat Conrad Prebys Theatre Center) and the 612-seat outdoor Lowell Davies Festival Theatre, home of its internationally renowned Shakespeare Festival. More than 250,000 people attend Globe productions annually and participate in the theater's education programs and outreach services. Numerous Broadway-bound premieres and revivals, such as *The Full Monty*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *A Catered Affair*, and the annual holiday musical, [Dr. Seuss'](#) *How The Grinch Stole Christmas!*, have been developed at [The Old Globe](#) and have gone on to enjoy highly successful runs in New York and at regional theatres across the country.

For more information, visit www.TheOldGlobe.org.

Photo by [Craig Schwartz](#).



[John Cariani](#) (Lord Edgar Hillcrest) and Jeffrey M. Bender (Lady Enid Hillcrest)



[John Cariani](#) (Lord Edgar Hillcrest) and Jeffrey M. Bender (Alcazar)



[John Cariani](#) (Jane Twisden) and Jeffrey M. Bender (Nicodemus)



Jeffrey M. Bender (Lady Enid Hillcrest) and [John Cariani](#) (Jane Twisden)



Jeffrey M. Bender (Nicodemus) and [John Cariani](#) (Jane Twisden)



[John Cariani](#) (Lord Edgar Hillcrest) and Jeffrey M. Bender (Lady Enid Hillcrest)



Jeffrey M. Bender (Lady Enid Hillcrest)



Jeffrey M. Bender (Lady Enid Hillcrest)



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Bender and Cariani Star in Old Globe's 'Mystery of Irma Vep' Starting in SD

PLAYBILL

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Andrew Gans Playbill On-Line – Fri Jul 31, 2:42 pm ET

Directed by Henry Wishcamper, the production will officially opening Aug. 6 at 8 PM, and performances will continue through Sept. 6.

Jeffrey M. Bender (Broadway's *Cymbeline*) and John Cariani (Tony nomination for *Fiddler on the Roof*) are the "cast of thousands," taking on the roles of Lady Enid, Lord Edgar, Nicodemus Underwood - and a mummy - among others.

"On a 'dark and stormy night,'" press notes state, "Lady Enid arrives at an estate with her new husband, who is under the spell of his deceased first wife and haunted by something that's prowling the grounds. Strange things begin to happen around Lady Enid while the mysterious portrait of Irma Vep hanging over the fireplace gazes down upon her. *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is a hilarious comedy that satirizes everything from Alfred Hitchcock's 'Rebecca' to Victorian Melodrama to 'The Mummy's Curse.'"

The creative team also includes Robin Vest (scenic design), Jenny Mannis (costume design), Jason Bieber (lighting design), Paul Peterson (sound design) and Kathryn Davies (stage manager).

The Old Globe is located in San Diego's Balboa Park at 1363 Old Globe Way. Tickets may be purchased online at www.TheOldGlobe.org, by phone at (619) 23-GLOBE or by visiting the box office.

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Above: "The Mystery of Irma Vep," a play with eight characters and only two actors, runs at The Old Globe Theatre through September 6.

"Noises Off" runs through September 6 at [Cygnet Theater](#) in Old Town.

"Time Flies" runs through August 16 at [New Village Arts](#) in Carlsbad as part of their Summer Comedy Festival.

"The Mystery of Irma Vep" runs through September 6 at the [Old Globe Theatre](#).

MAUREEN CAVANAUGH (Host): I'm Maureen Cavanaugh and you're listening to These Days on KPBS.

In the heart of summer vacation time, and in the middle of a thoroughly depressing recession, local theatre companies have wisely decided that this is not exactly the time to stage Oedipus Rex.

Comedy is the star of the hour, with the Old Globe, the La Jolla Playhouse, Cygnet Theater and New Village Arts all running comic plays. The light entertainment is aimed at giving the audience a good-old time at the theatre, and enticing people to splurge just a little for a pleasant night out.

While the object may be the same, the various plays feature different types of comedies, calling for different styles of acting and direction. It may look easy, but as we'll all soon learn...it takes skill, and talent to make an audience laugh out loud night after night.

Joining us to talk about the subtleties of the comic touch are my guests.

Guests:

Rosina Reynolds, a local actor and director. She is currently performing in Cygnet Theater's production of "Noises Off."

Joshua Everett Johnson, the associate artistic director of New Village Arts. He is directing and performing in their production of "Time Flies."

Jeffrey Bender, one of two actors in the Old Globe Theater's production of "The Mystery of Irma Vep."

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Bender and Cariani to Star in Old Globe's *Mystery of Irma Vep*

By Andrew Gans
July 9, 2009

Casting has been announced for the Old Globe's upcoming production of Charles Ludlam's gothic spoof, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.

Directed by Henry Wishcamper, the production will begin performances in the Globe's Arena Stage at the San Diego Museum of Art's James S. Copley Auditorium July 31 with an official opening Aug. 6 at 8 PM. Performances will continue through Sept. 6.

Jeffrey M. Bender (Broadway's *Cymbeline*) and John Cariani (Tony nomination for *Fiddler on the Roof*) will be the "cast of thousands," taking on the roles of Lady Enid, Lord Edgar, Nicodemus Underwood – and a mummy – among others.

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**Send questions and comments to the [Webmaster](#)
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THE RAGE

August 2009



Now through September 6

THE MYSTERY OF IRMA VEP

The Old Globe Theatre is pleased to present Charles Ludlam's, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, the hilarious comedy that satirizes everything from Hitchcock's *Rebecca* and Victorian melodrama to *The Mummy's Curse*. This Obie-winning gothic spoof was once the most-produced play in America and now it comes to uproarious, high-camp life on The Old Globe's intimate arena stage. The production runs through September 6. For tickets, dial 619.234.5623.