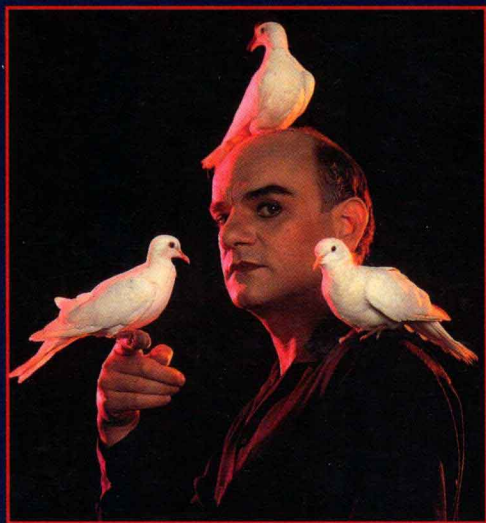


Ridiculous Theatre

SCOURGE OF
HUMAN FOLLY



The Essays and Opinions of
CHARLES LUDLAM

EDITED BY
STEVEN SAMUELS

RIDICULOUS THEATRE:
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THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

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RIDICULOUS THEATRE:
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Introduction

Well-known, he would be famous. Influential, he would be unavoidable: onstage, on screen, over the airwaves or by whatever means late twentieth-century culture contrived. He had long labored Off-Off Broadway—obscurely and conspicuously in frequent alternation; honestly and valiantly always—but now he would bring one of his major works, *Der Ring Gott Farblonjet*, to the Great White Way (which moribund monstrosity, more than a few believed, he might help restore to former glory); now he would mount Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* audaciously (in the process possibly skewing our perception of the Bard); now, at last, he would achieve hard-won celebrity (pending the release of the first Hollywood feature to feature him, *The Big Easy*). Having previously portrayed figures historical and fictional, male and female both—Bluebeard, Camille, Hamlet and Maria Callas among the many—now this master illusionist would attempt his greatest feat: he would play Houdini.

But in 1987, at the height of his career, Charles Ludlam died, and little of this would be. Remarkably, his death made the front page of *The New York Times*. There was regret for the loss of all he promised, but respect for all he had achieved.

A mere forty-four when he escaped us, Charles had devoted two decades to leading New York's Ridiculous Theatrical Company from cult following to international acclaim. As artistic director, playwright,

director, quondam designer and incomparable star, he had ransacked theatrical and literary history in an idiosyncratic, evolutionary quest for a modern art of stage comedy, essaying epic, farce, tragedy and assorted other genres (including several of his own devising) to create his twenty-nine *Complete Plays*—most prominently, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*.

His achievement was singular, if not unprecedented. Exploiting and surviving the aesthetic ferment of the sixties, he had sidestepped a lucrative commercial career, pursuing the unique circumstances which allowed him to create his plays without interference, *in the theatre*—scripting his comic dramas as he staged them. Who besides Charles could boast of a year-round repertory theatre devoted to his own writings exclusively, or of having introduced at least one new play and sometimes several in each of twenty consecutive New York seasons? Who could challenge his claim to have produced the most thought-provoking, liberating, *playable* entertainments available in the modern repertoire?

Over the years his audience grew, but few were aware of the rigorous framework Charles assembled for his theatrical explorations. Only two of his essays were well-distributed in his lifetime: “The Seven Levels of the Theatre,” published in the short-lived *Performance* magazine in 1972, and “Manifesto: Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly,” which appeared in *The Drama Review* in 1975. Unless you were among the small number of readers of New York’s *Gay Power* newspaper in the early seventies, you would have missed his opinions of Mildred Dunnock and Zoe Caldwell (“*Colette*”), his celebration of the religious art of an obscure Lower East Side queen (“Mr. T. or El Pato in the Gilded Summer Palace of Czarina-Tatlina”), and his exaltation of the use of female impersonators traditionally and in his own early plays (“A Monograph and a Premature Memoir”).

Prose puzzled him. He wrote little of it, in part because he was too busy writing, producing and performing his plays, but primarily because he understood the formal constraints of drama—the human, technical and temporal limitations of the theatre—and without them, how could he know when to stop?

After his death, a cache of fragmentary essays and notes was found

amidst the notebooks and papers in his crowded, dusty study, together with significant statements written for grant applications to the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York State Council on the Arts, unusually provocative press releases, and the transcript of an illuminating talk he gave at New York University in 1979. Of these, I have chosen a half dozen to publish in full. "The Last Shall Be First" was printed as a program note for the revival of Charles' second staged play (the first produced under the aegis of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company), *Conquest of the Universe or When Queens Collide*. "Costume Fetishism or Clothes Make the Man," a paper he labored over in more sexually liberated days, reveals his intimate knowledge of the homosexual demimonde, and "Salomé" reflects the sexual and political ramifications he perceived in a role he never played but which absorbed his attention over many years. "From Pillar to Post Modern" recapitulates a theme to which he returned relentlessly—the fraudulence of most of what passed as "avant-garde" in the theatrical arena; a brief dialogue, "Ludlam Versus Critics," embodies his ambivalence towards one of the industry's more dubious necessities; and his abandoned "*Hedda Journal*," prompted by an independent production of *Hedda Gabler* with Charles in the title role, demonstrates how serious his comedy could be.

Engaging and insightful as these materials are, they only hint at the discoveries made throughout a life comprehensively focused on the theatre. Apart from the stage, the true outlet for the endless flow of ideas that bubbled up from Charles' superheated brain was conversation, talk which may have seemed an unstoppable stream of babble to the casual observer but which was, instead, the continual reprocessing of the endless supply of plot and dialogue preserved by a nearly photographic memory, combined with the vast, practical experience of a long and remarkable career.

Few of us privileged to have worked closely with Charles were blessed with his gift of total recall. Though we possess ineradicable memories, and have incorporated Charles' vision into our own lives and works, we cannot reproduce with any acceptable degree of accuracy his actual words.

Happily, Charles gave in-depth interviews frequently, and it is within these that the majority of his undramatized ideas reside. From

the most detailed reports of the making and meaning of his plays to his more broad-based understanding of the purpose and place of comedy in modern life, Charles' thoughts were carefully formulated and cogently expressed.

Reprinting the interviews as they ran originally would make an impossibly long read, and significant pruning would gut the structure of these newspaper, magazine and radio pieces. In attempting to abide by Charles' intention someday to edit them into a book—keeping in mind that he learned early on to determine in advance what he wanted to say and to say it whatever he was asked—I have dispensed with questions, bringing Charles' "Opinions" together thematically ("Broadway," "Opera," "Film," etc.); and, in "Confessions of a Farceur," constructing a narrative derived from one of his many unrealized ambitions: an autobiography.

In the early eighties, Charles announced the writing of his memoirs much as he announced a new play: as an accomplished fact, once he'd written a few pages. His eyes lit up mischievously when he spoke of publishing his life story. Untruths and distortions had been perpetrated which he longed to set right. His autobiography was to be a gleeful act of revenge against all he felt had wronged him.

That project, too, died with him, but here Charles' assorted prose writings form the basis of an intellectual and aesthetic autobiography, which his interviews—edited discreetly—flesh out. The fragment which begins and lends its name to this section is among the most polished of Charles' prose statements: a forthright, deeply felt, well-considered exposition of the nature of his occupation as a maker of theatre.

He was not shy about explaining his plays, particularly since they provoked controversy and were, he felt, ill-understood. Charles had a preternaturally clear concept of what he was doing and he wanted to share it with his audience. He was his own best explicator, and if contradictions abound they expose not only Charles' ability to comprehend and represent opposing views, but also his admirable willingness to abandon a position or to alter course in accommodating circumstance and change.



The ultimate accommodation is addressed in a final dialogue I call "Envoi." This unusually autobiographical effort appears unexpectedly in Charles' *Houdini* notebook, amidst notes and drafts of scenes toward what was widely anticipated would be the culmination of his experiments with magic and illusion.

Early in 1987, when "Envoi" was written, Charles knew he had AIDS, but kept that knowledge close to home. He proceeded heroically with his myriad obligations: revising his comic take on Wagner's *Ring* for Broadway; preparing *Titus Andronicus* for the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park; editing his virtually handmade film, *The Sorrows of Dolores*, for its premiere at the Collective for Living Cinema; and embarking upon the writing, directing and portraying of *Houdini*, as well as the writing and directing of a documentary film about the making of the play.

When he was hospitalized on April 30 of that year, he refused to discuss or admit his illness. Even after the signing of his will, death was an unacknowledged subject. As the Ridiculous Theatrical Company's general manager, I had no idea of how Charles would like his company to continue without him.

That he wanted his company to proceed was inarguable. During a fall 1986 National Public Radio interview about his last play, *The Artificial Jungle*, the question was raised as to whether or not the Ridiculous could carry on without him. His fellow actors, as one, said no, which made him furious. Afterwards, he made it plain that he perceived himself to be building an enduring institution, and that he expected his work to flourish even after he was gone.

The company's decision to go on was made before we laid him in the ground. His co-star and lover, Everett Quinton, announced that Charles had named him his successor as artistic director; but, in his modesty, Everett felt keenly the burden of his position and joked self-deprecatingly on occasion of perhaps having fooled us all, since there was no witness other than himself to Charles' wishes.

As it happens, Charles bore his own witness. By the time I presented a transcript of "Envoi" to Everett, its points were moot

anyway. While Charles lived, there was widespread doubt that anyone else would have the ability or nerve to mount or inhabit his plays. Five years after his passing, the persisting Ridiculous has repeatedly revived his works successfully, and they have been produced by numerous other companies around the world.



When I joined the Ridiculous twelve years into its history, I was fortunate enough to have half an hour each night to sit in Charles' dressing room and listen as he costumed himself, applied makeup, and talked. In structuring this book, I have thought often of that unintentional seminar in the Ridiculous, and of our thousands of subsequent artistic, business, political and personal conversations. In this volume, I have presented Charles in ways he could never have envisioned, but as I read and reread these words it is Charles' voice I hear, his wide-ranging considerations, his insatiable desire to reformulate and reform a debased culture, his endless effort to exceed his own extraordinary capabilities and to provide a vision—not of a better future, but of a better *present*.

Those who have mistaken Charles' theatre for the wild and meaningless antics of a gifted buffoon may be startled by this manifestation of a clear-eyed, hard-headed thinker who passionately believed in stage comedy as the best public forum for the discussion and dissemination of ideas. *Ridiculous Theatre: Scourge of Human Folly* belongs on that short shelf of books by master craftsmen. In these pages, too—as well as in his plays and on the stages that unfold them—the glory that was Ludlam lives on.

Steven Samuels
New York City
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S.S.

Chronology

1943

Charles Ludlam born April 12 in Floral Park, Long Island, the middle son of Joseph William Ludlam and the former Marjorie Braun. The family lives in New Hyde Park, across Jericho Turnpike from a movie theatre.

1949

Ludlam lost at the Mineola Fair, where he wanders into a Punch and Judy show which affects him profoundly.

1950

First appearance in a school play, *Santa in Blunderland*.

1953

Family moves to Greenlawn, Long Island.

1958

Apprenticeship at the Red Barn Theater, a Long Island summer stock company.

1959

Lasting impression made on Ludlam by Living Theatre performances he attends in Greenwich Village.

1961

Founds the Students' Repertory Theatre in Northport, Long Island. Matriculates at Hofstra University with an acting scholarship.

1964

Writes first full-length play, *Edna Brown*, which he subsequently destroys.

1965

Graduates from Hofstra, moves to New York City.

1966

Makes his New York stage debut as Peeping Tom in Ronald Tavel's *The Life of Lady Godiva*, directed by John Vaccaro at the Play-House of the Ridiculous. Spontaneously creates the role of Norma Desmond in Tavel's *Screen Test*. Completes first extant play, *Big Hotel*, staged by Vaccaro under the aegis of the Ridiculous.

1967

During rehearsals for his second play, *Conquest of the Universe*, Ludlam is summarily fired by Vaccaro. Most of the actors walk out in protest, urge Ludlam to found his own troupe. He stages his own version of *Conquest of the Universe* as *When Queens Collide*, the first production by the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

1968

Revives *Big Hotel* in midnight repertory with *When Queens Collide* at Tambellini's Gate on Second Avenue. Stages Bill Vehr's *Whores of Babylon* several times, once as a shadow-puppet presentation. Collaborates with Vehr on *Turds in Hell*, which is subsequently published in *The Drama Review*. Temporarily renames his company the Trockadero Gloxinia Magic Midnight Mind Theatre of Thrills and Spills.

1969

First version of *The Grand Tarot*, "A Masque." *Village Voice* Obie award to Ludlam and the Ridiculous for distinguished achievement in the Off-Broadway Theatre.

1970

Bluebeard, "A Melodrama in Three Acts," becomes the company's first critical success, originally staged at Christopher's End, then briefly at La MaMa ETC before an extended run at the Performing Garage. First college appearances. Guggenheim Fellowship in Playwriting awarded to Ludlam.

1971

First European tour. Second Prize awarded to *Bluebeard* at BITEF International Avant-Garde Theatre Festival in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Premiere of *Eunuchs of the Forbidden City* in Germany, with subsequent publication in *Scripts* magazine. *Bluebeard* published in two Off-Off-Broadway play anthologies. First grants to the Ridiculous Theatrical Company from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. "The Seven Levels of the Theatre" published in *Performance* magazine.

1972

Corn, "A Country-Western Musical," with music and lyrics by Virgil Young, staged. Plans for a subsequent Broadway production fall through.

1973

Camille, "A Tearjerker," also called "A Travesty on *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils," debuts with Ludlam in the title role. Obie for distinguished performance awarded to Ludlam for appearances in both *Corn* and *Camille*. Second European tour.

1974

Lease signed for the Evergreen Theater, the company's first "permanent" home. *Hot Ice* premiered, subsequently published in *The Drama Review*. Ludlam serves first of three terms on NYSCA's theatre panel.

1975

"Manifesto: Ridiculous Theatre, Scourge of Human Folly" published in *The Drama Review*. *Stage Blood* mounted, later published by Per-

forming Arts Journal publications in volume of *Ridiculous Theatre*. First performances of *Professor Bedlam's Educational Punch and Judy Show*, which receives a special Obie award. NYSCA "Younger Audience" commission to Ludlam to write *Jack and the Beanstalk*. The Evergreen sold by owner Grove Press to the Baha'i Foundation.

1976

Commission from Adela Holzer to write book for *Isle of the Hermaphrodites, or The Murdered Minion*, an abortive Broadway musical concerning Catherine de' Medici and the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre. Playwriting award from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund enables Ludlam to write *Caprice or Fashion Bound*, which marks the stage debut of Everett Quinton, with whom Ludlam will live and work for the rest of his life. Third European tour.

1977

CBS Fellowship to coach graduate students in playwriting at Yale University. Ludlam creates "Aphrodisiamania," a scenario for the Paul Taylor Dance Company, and writes *Der Ring Gott Farblonjet*, "A Masterwork," with a grant from the Ford Foundation's New American Plays program. Production wins Ludlam an Obie for design.

1978

The Ventriloquist's Wife, "A Psychodrama for Cabaret," plays several New York nightclubs and tours the country, including performances in the lounge of the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, earning enough money for the down payment on what becomes the company's permanent home at One Sheridan Square. Premiere of *Utopia, Incorporated*, "An Industrial." Award for Excellence and Originality in Comedy from the Association of Comedy Artists presented to Ludlam. Creation of *Anti-Galaxie Nebulae*, a sci-fi puppet serial written and performed in collaboration with Bill Vehr and Everett Quinton.

1979

Plays Chuckie in Mark Rappaport's film *Impostors*. Stages *The Enchanted Pig*, "A Fairy Tale for the Disenchanted." Revives *Conquest of*

the Universe or When Queens Collide. Creates *The Elephant Woman*, a "midnight frolic." Adapts Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and stars as Ebenezer Scrooge. Teaches "Eccentric Comedy" in the Experimental Theatre Wing at New York University. Begins filming *The Sorrows of Dolores*.

1980

Company's final tour under Ludlam's leadership. *The Production of Mysteries*, a twenty-minute opera, written with composer-in-residence Peter Golub. Ludlam creates *Reverse Psychology*, "A Farce," and subsequently directs William Wycherly's *The Country Wife* for the drama department at Carnegie-Mellon University.

1981

Stages second farce, *Love's Tangled Web*. Films *Museum of Wax* in Coney Island.

1982

Receives NEA Fellowship in Playwriting. Produces *Secret Lives of the Sexists*, "The Farce of Modern Life," and *Exquisite Torture*, "A Romantic Ecstasy."

1983

Adapts *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* into *Le Bourgeois Avant-Garde*, "A Comedy Ballet after Molière." Plays Maria Callas in *Galas*, "A Modern Tragedy," which is named among the year's best plays by *Time* magazine and *The New York Times*. A Drama Desk Special Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Theatre is presented "in recognition of fifteen years of Ridiculous productions." Ludlam receives an NEA Fellowship to teach playwriting at Yale University.

1984

The Mystery of Irma Vep, "A Penny Dreadful," starring Ludlam and Quinton, is named among the year's best plays by *Time* magazine and *The New York Times*, wins Drama Desk and Obie awards for the actors' performances and a Maharam Foundation Award for Excellence in