

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

Appeared in - The Australian

The Mystery of Irma Vep

by Charles Ludlam

State Theatre Company of South Australia

Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre

Until 31 May. Tickets \$28 -42

If you were to feed the plot lines of *Wuthering Heights*, *The Wolf Man*, *The Mummy's Curse* and *Rebecca* into a blender and spin at high speed, the result might well be *The Mystery of Irma Vep*. This theatrical tour de force for two was first performed in 1984 by playwright Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater Company and became the surprise New York hit of that year. Subsequently, it has become one of the most frequently performed plays in the US.

While that is a surprising, even alarming, fact, it is not hard to see why. This is theatre for theatre's sake. Two male actors, at breakneck speed, play eight characters in a blaze of quick changes, sight gags, silly walks and even sillier dialogue. The style is gothic camp - an affectionate mix of Victorian penny dreadful and Old Hollywood. The setting is Mandacrest, family seat to the Egyptologist, Lord Edgar Hillcrest and his new wife, erstwhile actress Lady Enid. There are faithful retainers of course, the Mrs Danvers-like Jane Twisden and the sentimentally loyal Nicodemus, farm worker and part-time werewolf. And wait, I almost forgot, there is also the mysterious, anagrammatical Irma Vep.

The State Theatre Company and director Warren Coleman have very much made this a vehicle for the exceptional comic talents of Paul Blackwell, reunited with his Sydney colleague Keith Robinson. Designer Dean Hills has fun with his brief - the living room of a stately home complete with high French doors, revolving wood panelling, and a painting which bleeds, while his Egyptian tomb is a sarcophagus Indiana Jones would be happy to visit. The difficulty for Warren Coleman, though, is that the spacious main stage at the Dunstan Playhouse is a far cry from the cramped basement theatre where this play first gained its reputation. This production gives the actors a harder task when what is essentially a small idea is writ too large.

But full marks for the performers who make countless costume changes and manage a throttling amount of dialogue and exposition. Keith Robinson's besieged Lord Edgar is excellent but his portrayal of Jane is often too broad for the Anna Massey stuff to work. As Lady Enid, Paul Blackwell takes drag back into character study, his gestures and vocal shadings are often startling - even as he is trading dialogue with himself morphing into Nicodemus, a sensitive soul with buck teeth, a wooden leg and a dread of the full moon.

This is the essence of Ludlam's text - a stew of Shakespeare and flowery Victorian pulp. Its style is its meaning. But it just doesn't make sense, Lady Enid protests at one point, and she is quite right. However, when all of the cross-dressed virtuosity is working smoothly, as in the hilariously sustained dulcimer duet, no-one seems to even notice.