

Theater

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Intiman Theatre taps into the enduring appeal of 'Irma Vep'

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Helen Roundhill and Jesse Calixto in Intiman's "The Mystery of Irma Vep." (Joe Moore)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

Not many movie characters live on in pop

culture for a century. But Irma Vep, the master criminal from the 1915 French silent movie series, “Les Vampires,” is hard to kill. In the 10-part series about the criminal organization known as The Vampires, master criminal Irma Vep outlived her entire gang before she was shot (by the hero’s wife) in the final episode. But a century later, Irma Vep continues to make unexpected appearances.

For its first production since the onset of the pandemic and the first in the company’s [new location](#) at Seattle Central College’s Erickson Theatre, Intiman Theatre will revive “The Mystery of Irma Vep: A Penny Dreadful.” Charles Ludlum’s 1984 madcap farce will be presented Feb. 8-26. With Seattle theater artist Jasmine Joshua directing, two performers will play more than half a dozen characters through 35 costume quick-changes, and, the company hopes, generating a lot of laughter.

Although named for the iconic Irma Vep character, Ludlum’s “The Mystery of Irma Vep” is no more a remake of “Les Vampires” than was the similarly named 1996 film “Irma Vep,” a movie about movies starring Hong Kong cinema star Maggie Cheung. In both cases, borrowing the name of Irma Vep provides historical and thematic context by reference for viewers in the know. No one has attempted to re-create the labyrinthine plot of the nearly seven-hour “Les Vampires.” Ludlum gave a stronger clue to the content of the “Irma Vep” he wrote for his own Ridiculous Theatrical Company in the subtitle, “A Penny Dreadful.”

“The penny dreadfuls were these kind of maudlin, cheap little horror and sci-fi serials about monsters and vampires and stuff,” said Joshua. Meant to be dramatic, the penny dreadfuls (like the silent film crimes of Irma Vep) come across as campy today. Though similarly outlandish, Ludlum’s pearl-clutching camp is entirely intentional.

Set in an English manor bedeviled by mummies, “It takes place vaguely in the late

Victorian-Edwardian time. And during that time period, I mean, talk about strict gender roles, right? So that is the setup. They were like, 'Oh yes, a man and a woman have to be these two certain things.' And of course, we're going to immediately ruin all of that," said Joshua. "The glory of this show is that you can't cast for the genders of the characters because you only get two actors. And so, it's really — to me — testing the very thesis that I revolve around, which is, 'Does it [gender] really matter?'"

Joshua's own Reboot Theatre Company specializes in rethinking established works through nontraditional casting. Established in 2014 with an all-female production of "1776," the company uses nontraditional casting, design and other means to reinterpret established works. "If you can believe that a woman could play Benjamin Franklin and still move you and make you cry, then what else [is possible]," Joshua said.

Intiman's artistic director Jennifer Zeyl knew Joshua from the Intiman Emerging Artist Program and was familiar with their work at Reboot Theatre and Cafe Nordo. She reached out to Joshua to direct "The Mystery of Irma Vep," a play that repurposes existing material through myriad references, from insider jokes about 1980s New York society to Hitchcock's "Rebecca." When Ludlum used the name Irma Vep for his Rebecca-like titular (presumably) deceased first wife, he was probably aware that the actor who first portrayed Irma Vep, [Musidora](#), was openly bisexual, counting the writer Colette (whose plays she produced) among her lovers.

"It gets dramaturgically very deep," said Joshua. "Part of the theater of the ridiculous is social commentary, which also the penny dreadfuls did."

In Ludlum's case, "So much of what Ludlum wanted to do was to bring gay and queer culture from the clubs and from the bars into theater," said Joshua.

But Ludlum was also a product of his own time.

"When Charles Ludlum wrote this, he was aware enough to write about the exotification and colonization of the Middle East and Egypt," said Joshua. He even included a joke about donating stolen artifacts to the British Museum. But other jokes — like a mummy speaking gibberish Arabic — haven't held up.

The silent film Irma Vep changed her disguise after every crime; so too, Ludlum's play needed to change to stay effective. After consulting with dramaturgs of Middle Eastern descent, Intiman got approval from the Ludlum estate to cut offensive

dialogue from the second act.

“It’s going to be hopefully a little less racist,” Joshua said. “My version of ‘Irma Vep’ is going to be through a 2022 lens, but still paying tribute and honoring the legacy of Ludlum.”

This post has been updated with Jennifer Zeyl’s correct title at Intiman Theatre and to note that Zeyl knew Joshua from the Intiman Emerging Artist Program.

“The Mystery of Irma Vep: A Penny Dreadful”

Feb. 8-26; Intiman Theatre production at Erickson Theatre, 1524 Harvard Ave., Seattle; \$5-\$75; masks and proof of vaccination or negative coronavirus test required; 206-315-5838, [intiman.org](https://www.intiman.org)

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