The Rise
of the
House of Usher

By Sean Abley

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Edgar Allan Poe's famous short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," gets turned upside down in this sequel -- of sorts! Far from the Gothic mood of the original story, this is a broad comedy-mystery with a little bit of the macabre thrown in for fun. Some characters from the original story, as well as a few new ones, are now trapped in a different mansion. They've been called together on this dark and stormy night by a mysterious host for a reading by Poe. The guests are unknown to each other, yet there must be a connection because one by one they disappear. It's all deliciously spooky as lightning flashes, pendulums, and poisoned tea raise the play's tension and dark humor.

Actors are encouraged to break character and the fourth wall, as well as add physical bits if inspired to do so. The characters are aware that they are in a play, and can engage the audience socially when appropriate.

Performance time: about 50 minutes.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

The Rise of the House of Usher was commissioned by the Virginia City Players (Stacey Gordon, Artistic Director). The play opened on June 26, 2007 at the Virginia City Opera House in Virginia City, MT. It was directed by Sean Abley and stage managed by Katie M. Manion. Costume design by Asha MacDonald, assisted by Jan Wood. Set design by Theresa K Jenson. Technical direction by Jason Blanchard. Musical direction by Charles Elliott. The cast was as follows:

EDGAR ALLAN POE: Jamie Parnell
MRS. JOHN LAIDLAW: Deena Badr
MATTHEW WEXLY: Garrett Burreson
DR. WILLIAM NELSON: Aaron Bartz
MRS. ESTHER NELSON: Nora Mundé Gustuson
ADELADE ANDREWS: Maria Giarrizzo
STEVENS: Forrest Leder
HARRIET: Margaret Gilmore

(The original version had a slightly different ending that did not include Roderick Usher.)

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 m, 4 w. Doubling possible.)

EDGAR ALLAN POE: Poet and author.

MRS. JOHN LAIDLAW: Matron, widow, medium, and fan of all things alcohol.

MATTHEW WEXLY: Young hero.

DR. WILLIAM NELSON: Doctor and husband to Esther.

MRS. WILLIAM (ESTHER) NELSON: A curious wife.

ADELADE ANDREWS: Ingénue.

STEVENS: The butler.

HARRIET: The clumsy, unqualified maid.

RODERICK USHER: Madman.

DOUBLING: The actor playing Poe could double as Usher if you want to keep the cast at an even eight members, or use your Usher actor as your male understudy.

SETTING

The Chandler Mansion. The action takes place in the typical Victorian drawing room, with overstuffed furniture, bookshelves, art, etc. DSC is a high-backed, overstuffed chair facing upstage – the back of the chair to the audience. Other locations suggested by lighting: the kitchen, a hallway, the cellar, a guest bedroom, the clock tower.

TIME

The evening of October 30, sometime in the mid 1840s.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

The Rise of the House of Usher was written for the actors to have fun. Feel free to break character and the fourth wall, as well as add physical and sound bits wherever you may be inspired to do so. The characters (until the last scene) are aware that they are in a play, and should engage the audience socially when appropriate. However, when breaking character, always do so as an actor of this period – meaning, no current day references, slang, etc. You are an actor in the 1840s.

While there may seem to be quite a few locations in *The Rise of the House of Usher*, the original production took place on a tiny stage with one main area and two downstage wing areas. The main stage area was set as the drawing room, with simple drops, curtains and light changes suggesting the other rooms.

We tried to have as few blackouts as possible, as they tend to kill the pace of the play, but there are obviously some moments that require them. Changing the scene by shifting lights, dropping a drop, or bringing in a curtain is always preferable to bringing the action to a dead stop with a blackout.

I'd like to thank the cast, crew and Artistic Director of the Virginia City Players 2007 for all their hard work on the original production, and everything they contributed to this published version of the script.

Scene 1

(AT RISE: The drawing room, with an overstuffed chair facing upstage – the back of the chair to the audience. Facing the chair are DR. and MRS. NELSON, MRS. JOHN LAIDLAW, MATTHEW WEXLY and ADELADE ANDREWS.)

EDGAR ALLEN POE: *(From the chair.)* "There was a long, tumultuous shouting sound, like the voice of a thousand waters. And the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed suddenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher."

(MRS. NELSON applauds wildly.)

MRS. LAIDLAW: Why, that's horrible! What a gruesome entertainment!

MATTHEW: And impossible. Who has ever heard of that ... cata –

DR. NELSON: Catalepsy. And I'm afraid it exists. *(Whips out a small reference book. Reading.)* "Catalepsy. A physical condition usually associated with catatonic schizophrenia, characterized by suspension of sensation, muscular rigidity, fixity of posture, and often by loss of contact with environment." Check the insides of certain coffins and you'll see scratch marks from the previously conscious but comatose victims who have been buried alive, only to awaken, trapped inside.

MRS. NELSON: Do you see why I married a doctor? All of those deliciously macabre situations he can spin like gold for the necromancer.

MRS. LAIDLAW: You actually enjoyed that?

MRS. NELSON: Immensely!

ADELADE: Who would believe such a tale? It's quite farfetched.

MATTHEW: It strains credulity!

ADELADE: Exactly!

(EDGAR ALLAN POE stands up from the chair, revealing himself to the audience.)

EDGAR: Well, then you'll surely want to avoid my next, soon-to-be published work, "The Tell-Tale Heart."

(The BUTLER and MAID enter to move the chair to a less conspicuous location onstage and exit again.)

ADELADE: About a talkative heart, perhaps?
EDGAR: Perhaps.
MRS. NELSON: Well I, for one, can't wait! Mr. Poe, it truly is a pleasure to be invited to sit for a reading from such a literary giant. I must ask, why did you choose us?
MRS. LAIDLAW: Yes, Mr. Poe. Kindly tell us why you chose each of us to endure one of your grisly literary exercises. As a widow, the thought of my husband trying to escape his coffin –
EDGAR: Makes you feel guilty?
MRS. LAIDLAW: *(Into HER glass of wine.)* Certainly not ….
EDGAR: Good ladies and gentlemen, it wasn't I who summoned you to hear me read my work. It was you who summoned me.
DR. NELSON: Us?
EDGAR: Yes, I received this missive… *(Pulls an impossibly small invitation out of his pocket. Reads.)* "The presence of Mr. Edgar Allan Poe is required at the Chandler Mansion at 8 p.m. on the evening of October 30th. A reading for gathered guests of your work, "The Fall of the House of Usher," is requested." I arrived and was instructed by the servants to sit in this chair, greet you all as you came in, and read my work. I assumed all would be made clear after the reading.
MRS. LAIDLAW: I received a similar invitation, requesting my presence to hear you read. *(Pulls her invitation out, then searches for her glasses.)* Oh, my glasses have disappeared. Can anyone see my glasses? I'm horribly nearsighted.
MATTHEW: I received one as well. *(Pulls out his invitation.)*

End of Freeview

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