

Reviews

The Fall of the House of Usher

play by Steven Berkoff
original tale by Edgar Allan Poe

directed by Gérald Garutti
Company C[h]aracter(e)s

first staged in March 2005
in Paris, at the Vingtième Théâtre
(in English with French subtitles)



The Fall of the House of Usher
"Du Poe plein pot" (*Poe at full power*)

by René Solis, 12 March 2005

"A gothic tale:" this is how the director Gérald Garutti defines *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the short story of Edgar Allan Poe in which two aristocrats at the end of their line, a twin brother and sister, melt in their decayed mansion in front of an impotent witness. Upturned chairs hang from the ceiling as chandeliers, the ancient looking costumes, red and white, could have come from a trunk in the attic; filtered light, smoke, hypnotic music that evokes the sitar (really an acoustic contrabass), give the whole thing a sort of *Rocky Horror Picture Show* aesthetic.

The three actors (Shane Bordas, Mark Lawrence, Diana Rosalind Trimble) naturally move between expressionism and ellipsis. The author, Steven Berkoff, who is responsible for the adaptation of the story, has turned it in to a opera libretto : solos, duos, trios, everything could be sung and the same interpretation would work. Garutti, who works between London and Paris with a company (Coincidence Theater) that was founded at Cambridge (his previous works are: *Roberto Zucco* and *Richard III*), has great potential and will go far.



The Choice of Evene
The Fall of the House of Usher

Ranking: ****

by Géraldine Violet, 5 March 2005

There are suspended chairs. They are broken. In pieces. Attached by a leg, or by their backs. That's it. They are the set, a visible and metaphoric background, capturing in and by themselves the upturned and gangrenous aesthetic that Poe's words unleash. These words, that the three actors let whistle, have a bitter taste. They weave the worrying shadow that hangs over the house of Usher.

A brother and a sister, Roderick and Madeleine, are the last survivors of a long and incestuous line established and propagated in devastating consanguinity. The third character is the friend, he who visits, who comes all the way to this house overwhelmed by shadows, a house of silence, fear, cries, grimaces, abbreviated whispers. A madness permeates and overcomes everything, rolling over the faces, deforming all postures, every look is disgusting. Especially Roderick's. We remain suspended, paralyzed, bewitched by such pale beauty. The thin set wonderfully amplifies the interpretation as a hallucination of the actors.

Here, the dead mix with the living and vice versa. And we are left astray, here and there, in the footsteps of the friend, of the chorus, in the prompter's box, it makes no difference, his presence testifies to the break up of the house. Difficult in this tortuous maze, invisible and yet there, to leave unscathed by this stifling and breathtaking gothic tale.

by Bruno Portesi, 7 March 2005

In a ruinous mansion, the vestige of a dynasty that has long passed its apogee, the two heirs, Roderick and Madeleine Usher, are visited by a childhood friend. The Friend serves as a sort of mirror to this couple of twins, to the spectacle of their madness, to the reawakening of their troubling and incestuous passions. In this house which is frighteningly anthropomorphic, made of ancestral stones and flesh that has built up over many consanguine generations, the narrative drives the couple from the depths of psychosis to death and its ghosts.

Only one hour and fifteen minutes is little time to say all that is said in this play. And yet, the challenge is accomplished, brilliantly even, because nothing is more terrifying than this hour and fifteen minutes, dense, stifling, asphyxiating, in which everything seems to be screamed and felt in a single whisper, in the perfect confluence of the acting, impeccable direction, and its innovative set, ringing true in spite of the tragic dimensions of the story, appropriate music, and all of the tension of the Edgar Allan Poe's literary genius. Terrible yet delicious because Poe is the author of these horrors, and he is remarkably and devoutly adapted here.

The spectator, truly captivated if he plays the game and lets himself be transported by the narrative, will be hit by reawakening memories of stories read long ago and too quickly forgotten: those tense and exciting hours spent, doubtlessly as an adolescent, reading the short stories of this American writer. The words are nothing without the worlds that spring up between the lines, here exhumed by a great directorial talent, masterful, distinct without showing off, playing with codes rather than artifices, to the point of being sober in its refinement. Let's hazard an oxymoron: sober refinement born, one believes, from a grave relationship, culturally serious and consequential, always employs all the tools of narrative.

The set, Dalian, is made up of broken and worn chairs, upturned, above the protagonists, functionally perverted because one cannot rest on them. In the obscurity of the Vingtième théâtre, lost in the Parisian heights, the lighting and the music do the rest: blood reds, vampirish, fatal purples, and ghostly whites are the primary colors of a collapsing world, having

crossed the Styx, it seems, or at least on its banks; and the original notes of Mark Deutsch, born only from strings, mix familiar sounds (violin, sitar, contrabass) with oriental airs in a quasi-macabre symphony that reminds us at times of the celebrated elegies of “Dead Can Dance,” comprise this aesthetic, poetic - “POEtic” – heavy, decadent, gothic in a word....

This set sticks like a case to the performances of the three actors, stupefying in that they maintain a perfectly suited dramatic intensity without mimicking or exaggerating the characters that inhabit them during this long hour. The beauty of the text adapted from Poe’s story by Steven Berkoff is perfectly brought into perspective by these performances wherein their elocution is accompanied by audacious and well-thought choreography, eloquent miming, expressive gestures, confident interludes – everything primordial. Diana Rosalind Trimble and Shane Bordas portray two tragic twins, two fools from beyond the grave, strong characters that take the spectator hostage in the imaginary furor of Edgar Allan Poe.

If one is Parisian, one must quickly go to see this electroshock (second week of the show is from the 9th to the 13th of March) before the show leaves to play abroad, in London and New York. Because Garutti, and his company, Coincidence Theater, like to straddle the Channel and the Atlantic. The director has already received acclaim for his *Roberto Zucco* by Koltès and *Richard III*, in England and in France, and he here gives his name to a work of great maturity, revealing sure taste and a pointillist sense for detail.

La Nouvelle Revue Française

Last century and today's newest theatrical generation

by Hédi Kaddour, June 2005, Editions Gallimard, NRF n° 574, pp. 247-249

As of late, a particular interest has risen both in the theatre in the process of being created and in the group of young stage directors who create it. While this handful of young talent has surpassed amateurism, none are yet very widely known, but the work they generate is simply extremely promising. Gérald Garutti has staged a Berkoff piece at the Vingtième Théâtre, Robin Holmes a Beckett at the Théâtre de l'Île Saint-Louis, Frédérique Aït-Touati a Pinter/Sarraute at l'Espace Reuilly.

These three young directors-in-training engross themselves in nineteenth-century theatrical texts that passed just a short time ago for the avant-garde. Perfect portraits of dark and dismal worlds, these dramas are also sprinkled with an element of comedy but a comedy that reconciles nothing, a comedy that exists for the soul purpose of demonstrating the absurdity of the rapport between ourselves and the rest of the world. These works belong to a theatre of cruelty, a cruelty evidenced in a story of a sister buried alive (Berkoff, *The Fall of the House of Usher*) [...].

What is immediately remarkable is that these three young directors have already developed a profound understanding of how to manipulate the lighting and set to convey the essence of their subject: consider the red and white world of crime that claims to be involuntary for Berkoff [...]. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is an impressively successful production. It is triumphant in its own rite. A gothic representation playing perpetually with hallucination, mystery and madness, Garutti's version is colored above all by his portrayal of the vexation of the flesh and blood. His production benefits from the sensuality of the heroines, women of shackled dreams but of freed, dancing body, like that of Madeline [...]. This exaltation of the feminine results despite the fear of its power, Roderick preferring to bury Madeline rather than to acknowledge the forces she incarnates. [...]

Three very different productions : in each case these three young directors illustrate their deftness at adaptation, perhaps the most important stipulation for any successful director. Let us finish thus with a paradox: at the heart of each text lies the helplessness of mitigating the relation between oneself and the rest of the world, yet they have been recaptured by this new generation of directors who finds in them the energy to set out once again and reconstruct the tie between the play and its audience.