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Dramatic Publishing

Edgar Allan Poe's

**THE FALL OF THE HOUSE
OF USHER**

Adapted for the Stage
by
ROBERT LANIER



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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ROBERT LANIER
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(THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER)

ISBN: 0-87129-563-0

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

A Play in One Act
For Two Men and Two Women, Two extras

CHARACTERS

ETHAN POWELL . . the narrator, childhood friend of Roderick

RODERICK USHER. . the last male heir in the family of Usher

MADLINE USHER. twin sister to Roderick

MISS GRAY. housekeeper and nurse to the Ushers

The set design for a black box theatre was used in the original production at the Martin Experimental Theater in Louisville, Kentucky on October 16, 1993. It was directed by Nancy Niles Sexton and included the following cast:

Ethan Powell David Smith
Roderick Usher Wesley Ramsey
Miss Gray Elizabeth Zimmerman
Madeline Usher Ashley Smith



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This play is firmly based on Poe's original tale. The circumstances from the story have been altered as little as possible. The setting has been reduced to one room for production purposes. The cast includes only essential characters. Miss Gray, a composite character of sorts, takes care of the duties performed by the un-named but doubtlessly present members of the Usher household staff. She serves a further purpose, that of being an additional foil to the narrator in his quest to unravel the mysteries about him. While the explicit facts regarding Usher's predicament are few, the choices developed here are consistent and true to the spirit of the original text. It was desirable to keep intact certain passages of the narrative and the small bits of dialogue given in the story. An effort was made to retain a sense of Poe's unique use of language in the manner in which the characters converse. It is hoped that this treatment of Poe's beloved classic will satisfy and bring to life on stage one of his most haunting tales.

PRODUCTION NOTES

SETTING: The conservatory/study of Roderick Usher. Working counter-clockwise from the DR corner there is a guitar, music stand, sheet music and a small ottoman grouped together. DCL is a worn, leather chaise lounge. Books are scattered beneath it. A table with a lamp and several bottles containing various medicines is at the head of the chaise which is left of center. In the DL corner running upstage along the wall are bookshelves filled with old, obscure books and mementos from Usher's past all thrown in rather haphazardly, careless of order or aesthetic. Past the bookshelves is a serving trolley on which is a decanter for brandy and two glasses. Next, a window with ragged but once plush velvet curtains. The mist rises and falls about the house and only a leafless branch thrust across the view interrupts the grey void of the outside world. Upstage to the left of center is a desk on which there is a large oil lamp, more books, paper for writing, ink and a quill, a box of oil paints and a jar of brushes; an elegant and dusty chair sits askew before it. Near UC is an easel on which sits a canvas covered by a dark cloth. There is a large step up to the double doors which is the only passage to other portions of the house. When the doors are open a narrow hallway is revealed running left and right. On the wall central to the doors is a large sconce with several candles that light the passage. Below is a small table on which Miss Gray can rest her serving tray when opening the doors. Past the doors, UR is a heavy metal door which is flanked on either side by gruesome gargoyles.

Near the center of the room is a large leather chair, big enough to swallow Usher when he collapses in it. To the right of the chair another table with a candlestick and a large, spent candle, a few eccentric knick knacks, more books on the table

and around the feet of the chair. A patchwork of worn oriental rugs cover the floor in various colors and styles but all dark and somber. Around the room, high on the walls are paintings. Some are portraits, possibly of Usher's ancestors. Some are dim landscapes. All seem muddy and foreboding. Along with the books strewn about are articles of clothing, partially eaten bits of food, dirty glasses. Usher has been living in this room and signs abound of his careless and preoccupied state of mind. The room smells of linseed oil, mildew, dust, decay.

The candles and lamps dressing the set can be a problem. Be careful that it doesn't become a play about lighting candles. There are time lapses between the scenes and it is necessary to alter the interior light for the room but measures should be taken to move quickly and simply through these transitions. An electrified oil lamp with a smoked chimney proved helpful in the Walden production.

The poem, "The Haunted Palace," is Poe's, of course, and lifted in its entirety from the story. The actor in the original production had some facility with the guitar so we opted for a simple riff on an acoustic to accompany while he sang/chanted the words. As the recitation climaxed the guitar was deleted and sounds of wind, thunder and screams were layered on top which brought it all to an hysterical finish. The music was improvised and the development based on the actor's skill. As noted in the text, Usher can only tolerate music from stringed instruments. The treatment of the poem, therefore, needs to agree with the given circumstances, but that Usher actually play an instrument is not one of them. Recorded music is a possibility or simply a rhythmical recitation.

Another tricky spot is the top of Scene Seven, Usher's nightmare. In this sequence Usher sees figures out the window of his study that might represent his ancestors or shades of his sister and himself. The images should be real or at least perceptible to the audience. This demonstrates a tangible source for Usher's hysteria. Liquid smoke worked well in this scene because it rises and has an interesting visual effect with the light streaming through. Dry ice is preferable for the opening and closing monologues. Because it is heavy, it will pool around the feet and not obscure the actor's face.

Regarding sound effects, such as thunder, wind, rain, etc., use them liberally and loud. The assault on the senses is part of Usher's dilemma. Artfully executed, the sound effects can be a valuable tool to help draw the audience into the world of the play. In Scene Seven, as Powell reads from the story, there are notes regarding when the sounds should occur. The timing is Poe's. An effort should be made to re-create this scene as he conceived it. I think the effect is powerful. A significant departure from the text here in the climax could be disturbing to any who are familiar with the story.

There are many opportunities to be creative with the sound track. The sounds that emanate from the Usher mansion, I think is safe to say, are on the bizarre side of eerie. Experiment with the sounds of the storm, the creaking and groaning of the house, the whispers of demons that only Usher hears. One effect that delighted the Walden company was a recording of gibbons screeching and calling to each other. We used it in Scene Seven with the figures out the window. The human-like cries of the gibbons gave everybody the creeps. This can be found on the LasarLight Digital Sounds Effects series.

Their recordings are very clean and they also have a good selection of wind and thunder.

For a musical theme I would strongly suggest excerpts from Zoltan Kodaly's *Sonata for Solo Cello, op. 8*. The music is contemporary in style but has a quality that proved a fantastic compliment. There are passages of a brooding, ominous tone and others of forcefully driven rhythms. The pulsating sounds Kodaly created for the solo cello match the private hell in which we find Roderick Usher. All three movements have suitable material. Several recordings are available. Walden used EMI Records' Paul Tortelier (recorded in 1979, available on CD) which includes the Kodaly Sonata and a Tortelier Suite also for solo cello.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

SCENE ONE

AT RISE: A tight spot reveals ETHAN POWELL. Mist swirls around his feet and the sound of a lonely wind whistling through leafless trees is heard in the background. As POWELL narrates, a dim blue light reveals the stage in shadowy silhouette. MISS GRAY soundlessly circulates around the room lighting candles and oil lamps.

POWELL. During the whole of a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was but with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I looked upon the scene before me with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium, the bitter lapse into everyday life, the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into ought of the sublime. What was it, I paused to think...what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble.

I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down, but with a shudder even more thrilling than before, upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant eye-like windows.

Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. It's proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country. The manuscript gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed him, and of an earnest desire to see me as his best and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the apparent heart that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons.

SCENE TWO

AT RISE: The spotlight goes out as POWELL enters the conservatory/study of Roderick Usher. USHER is prostrate on the couch—limp, lifeless, dishevelled, covered by a drab cotton blanket. MISS GRAY awaits POWELL at center. Crossing upstage he hands a riding cape, hat and crop to MISS GRAY who receives them with a polite bow. MISS GRAY is efficient and terse, immune to POWELL's charms.)

GRAY. Welcome to the House of Usher, Mr. Powell. I am Miss Gray.

POWELL. Miss Gray. (*He nods to her.*) How is he?

GRAY. I'm sure he'll be doing much better once he sees you.

POWELL. Is he worse?

GRAY. That is hard to say. His condition has not improved.

POWELL. How long has he been like this?

GRAY. Quite some time now, sir.

POWELL. It has been several years since we laid eyes on one another. Do you think he'll have trouble recognizing me?

GRAY. No, sir. He's been expecting you.

POWELL. In his letter to me he spoke of a disorder that...

GRAY (*cutting him off*). Your presence here, I'm sure, will have a profound impact. He is most anxious to see you. He's been waiting.

POWELL. What is the doctor's prognosis?

GRAY. I couldn't say, Mr. Powell, but Dr. Godwin is an excellent physician. He's done all he can for the Master and his sister.

POWELL. I'm sure he has.

GRAY. Call if you require anything, Mr. Powell. (*MISS GRAY exits through the C door. POWELL watches her leave then turns and takes his first look at the room in which he has been left. It is the private study of a recluse filled with musical paraphernalia, art supplies, old books and paper for writing, all broadcast about the room. [See Production Notes for detailed set description.] POWELL cautiously approaches USHER.*)

POWELL. Usher? (*Prodding him gently.*) Usher, old boy?

USHER (*stirring a bit*). Mph...what?

POWELL. It's your old friend, Ethan Powell, come to visit.

USHER. Ethan? Ethan, is it really you? (*Sitting up quickly and rubbing his eyes, then holding a dizzy head.*)

POWELL. Yes. It is I.

USHER. Ethan! My God, Ethan it is you! (*He embraces him fiercely as if they were long lost brothers rather than distant school chums.*)

POWELL. There now, my friend, take it easy.

USHER. Thank God, thank God you've come. Where have you been? Oh, I've missed you! Oh dear God, you're here at last! You're here, you're here! (*USHER clings to POWELL like a drowning man. POWELL is taken aback at the demonstration. He sits on the sofa with USHER.*)

POWELL. It's...it's all right. I came as soon as I could.

USHER (*with tears in his eyes*). Pardon me. It's just that... (*Wiping his eyes.*) There now. Why, you look marvelously fit, Ethan! Simply marvelous. Sweet heaven, you are indeed a sight for sore eyes.

POWELL. You appear as if you've been having a bit of a rough go at it. I scarcely would have recognized you.

USHER. Ah, well, yes. The recent months have been rather difficult. That is to say trying in the least.

POWELL. Yes, I can imagine.

USHER. But now that you're here I believe I can take hold of my senses once again.

POWELL. What's the mystery here, Usher? Has your doctor been of any service to you? Able to find the cause of your malady? If he's not competent I can recommend specialists...(*USHER stands and begins to pace at the mention of his name and the barrage of questions.*)

USHER. Dr. Godwin is quite the capable physician but I'm afraid the nature of my "condition" falls outside the parameters of medical philosophy.

POWELL. You wrote to me of a bodily illness and a mental disorder and you say it is beyond the scope of your physician? I'm sure you're suffering from something rare indeed

but, Usher, discoveries are being made every day in medicines and surgeries. There are even some new-fangled theories about mental disorders.

USHER (*cringing at the name*). Would you call me Roddy, like you did in school. I always liked that.

POWELL. All right, Roddy.

USHER. Thank you.

POWELL. So, Roddy, what's the mystery?

USHER. I called you here because I knew you would understand. You know me better than any living soul save my sister. We were close. Like brothers.

POWELL. Yes, we were. But it has been some time since our school days.

USHER. Still in all that time I have never had a friend like you. Someone who understood me, who appreciated me for what I am. You are a unique individual, Ethan Powell. A man open in mind and spirit, seeking to comprehend the labyrinth of the human imagination, willing to look and examine without prejudice before drawing any conclusion. It is that man I have so desperately summoned. That uncluttered and facile mind to which I will speak. That pure heart that calls me friend to whom I will unveil my own black soul.

POWELL. That's rather daunting.

USHER (*on the verge of tears again*). Ethan. I have no one else. (*POWELL begins to realize how fragile USHER is. Not only is he an extremely nervous individual, given to emotional outbursts, but there is a paranoid component to his personality. POWELL gets up and brings USHER to the chair.*)

POWELL. Come, sit. (*USHER sits and POWELL takes the chair opposite.*) Tell me.

USHER. It's been perfectly awful, Ethan.

POWELL. I'm sure it has been. It's taken a dreadful toll on your nerves, Roddy.

USHER. My nerves? It's much more than nerves! Much, much more! My nervous condition is merely a...a family illness. It flares up now and again. It will soon pass but it does carry with it a curious host of unnatural sensations.

POWELL. How so?

USHER. Most particularly, I suffer from an acuteness of the senses.

POWELL. Acuteness of the senses?

USHER. Yes.

POWELL. How do you mean?

USHER. The five senses; taste, touch, sight, sound, smell. My abilities are heightened at times like these to an almost unendurable level. I can only tolerate the blandest foods, the dullest, most textureless cloths against my skin, the odors of all flowers I find oppressive. Light, I can barely tolerate this much even now. And you know of my love for music. There are now only sounds from stringed instruments that do not make me shudder with revulsion. The lightest noise invades my sleep so that my dream world is as my waking and at times I'm hard pressed to tell the difference.

POWELL. That sounds awful.

USHER. My condition is...an heirloom. Been in the family for years. (*Laughing at his own joke.*) I've learned to live with it.

POWELL. You said there was more?

USHER. Yes. There is. (*Urgently.*) That is why you're here. I'm too weak to face it alone. The path is dark and I am flanked by malevolent spirits. I cannot walk it by myself. Help me conquer this trial or at least to persevere to the end!

POWELL. You have my complete attention, Roddy, for as long as you require it.

USHER (*earnestly*). I shall perish! I must perish in this deplorable folly! Thus shall I be lost!

POWELL. What do you mean?

USHER. I fear...the future! I dread the events of the future. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of the soul. In this unnerved, in this pitiable condition, I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together in some struggle with the grim phantasm...fear! (*It has nearly broken USHER to speak even this much about his dilemma. He wrings his hands and struggles to hold back his tears.*)

POWELL. Roddy, my God. Of what are you so afraid? (*USHER shakes his head as if to ward off the question. Unwilling or unable to answer, POWELL is not sure. There is a knock on the door.*) A moment, please. (*He helps USHER compose himself before allowing admittance.*) Yes? Come in.

(The door slowly opens then slowly through the shadows MISS GRAY backs into the room bearing a tray with a pot of tea and two cups.)

POWELL. Ah, Miss Gray.

USHER (*snapping*). What do you want?

GRAY. I have some tea for you, sir.

USHER. Tea? Tea? I ordered no tea! I detest tea!

GRAY. Of course, sir. I thought perhaps Mr. Powell, after his long journey might care for a cup.

USHER (*looking away*). Of course. (*MISS GRAY walks over to the table before the sofa and sets her tray down. USHER retreats to a dark corner of the room, picks up a book and pretends to leaf through it but all the while warily watch-*

ing MISS GRAY for some suspicious move. POWELL takes all this in: USHER's inexplicable suspicion of his servant; the servant's nonchalance and apparent disregard for her employer's obviously strange behavior; and USHER's disdain for something so familiar as tea.)

GRAY. Cream or sugar, sir?

POWELL. No, thank you. *(She presents him the cup.)*

GRAY. Dinner will be served at seven in the dining room.

USHER. The dining room?!

GRAY. Yes, sir. With Mr. Powell here I thought you'd prefer to sup formally, sir.

USHER. I'll tell you what I prefer!

GRAY. Yes, sir. As you wish, sir. *(MISS GRAY leaves, shutting the door softly behind. USHER mutters something vile under his breath.)*

POWELL. Have you a reason to suspect her of some malfeasance?

USHER. She is wearing down my resistance, testing my vigilance. She is part of the reason I cannot sleep. She enters the room when I am no longer able to keep my eyes open and though I can hear her and I'm conscious of her presence I am helpless to stop her. In those moments I am completely at her mercy!

POWELL. You could dismiss her, Roddy. She is in your employ.

USHER. For what reason?

POWELL. I think sneaking about is reason enough.

USHER. If I were to dismiss her she would only be replaced by another, and this one, I am wise to her ways.

POWELL. Roddy, she may have been with you for some time but if you find her services are dissatisfactory then dismiss her, by all means. You have the right. You are the Master.

USHER (*a strained laugh escapes him*). I am the Master. I am the Master. Master of the House of Usher. The Lord of the Manor. Do I not look the part? My proud bearing and defiant chin? (*Sarcastically, and in mock boldness, he struts around the room.*) I am the Master. As such, the rights, all responsibilities, privileges and imprecations the station bequeaths are mine. The servants, possessions, lands and manor...this dwelling...this fortress. Do you know, I can't remember the last time I rode about the grounds. Did you find the outlands as dismal and gloom-stricken as is this house? The aura of this prison has pervaded all under its title. From the masonry and woodwork, to the occupants within, the vegetation surrounding us, even the lifeless clay on which it stands, all are permeated by this pestilent and mystic vapor. Nothing escapes its fetid touch. It has seeped into my very soul and laid its poisonous tracks throughout my body. You feel it too? You smell it? It is the stench of perversion, of nameless horrors, chaos, ruin, madness!

POWELL. Roddy, you must wrest yourself free of this misimpression. The house is merely old. Your body and spirit have assumed the pallor of your surroundings because of neglect. This gloom and doom is nothing that can't be cured by a brisk ride through the countryside. Get the blood moving through your veins and return some color to your cheeks.

USHER (*flaring with anger*). If it was nothing more than my own wasting flesh I would not have summoned you here! This shell means nothing. Nothing, I tell you! Let the devil take it! I would gladly hand it o'er to him would it allay my sister's torment. She who is dearer to me than my own flesh.

POWELL. Madeline, of course.

USHER. I implored you to come because you are like a brother to me. For now, she, my sole companion these many years has been irreparably marred from within. That beautiful instrument corrupted. And I cannot bear it. I cannot. I cannot.

POWELL. What is wrong with her?

USHER. She's dying! She's dying and they can't stop it. No one can stop it. With each day she grows weaker and weaker. With each day she comes closer to death's door. Alas, she's accepted it, embraced death hoping to find peace.

POWELL. Roddy, I know it's hard but you must get hold of yourself.

USHER (*burying his face in his hands, gasping for breath between his sobs*). I cannot bear it. I cannot!

POWELL (*compassionate and tender*). There, there, Roddy. Death is a part of life. A part of the cycle. The living go on.

USHER (*continues cryptically*). She will not go without me. She leads the way. She was always the brave one. The first to jump in and delightedly I followed. But now I am paralyzed. I cannot go forward or retreat or... (*USHER becomes rigid with fear as he ponders this horror. His stare becomes fixed, face like stone, jaw clenched, fists knotted in his gown. Only his lips move, muttering un-named fears to himself.*)

POWELL. Roddy? Roddy!?! (*Unable to shake him from this state, POWELL becomes alarmed and goes to the door calling for help.*) Miss Gray! I need your assistance, Miss Gray!

(*POWELL has to wait only a couple of anxious moments before MISS GRAY appears.*)