



# The MANY FACES of

The sheer range of his literary output would surely offer enough diversity for most writers. Not for Edgar Allan Poe. Unwilling (or perhaps unable) to content himself as merely a poet, dramatist, novelist, and creator of landmark short fiction, Poe took on more identities in his brief four decades of life than any fractured protagonist in his signature tales of madness or mystery. Sometimes driven by necessity (or fiscal desperation), sometimes by what appears to be a mix of curiosity, ambition, and compulsion, the peripatetic Poe varied his time as a leading literary light with stints as a cadet, soldier, scholar, critic, editor, publisher, and more. In keeping with this mutability, there are countless towns up and down the eastern seaboard with legitimate claims to Poe as some form or other of native son.

Boston has the honor of his birth, albeit by accident of timing. On January 19, 1809, a couple of itinerant actors, David and Elizabeth (Arnold) Poe welcomed son Edgar. Dad hailed from a prominent Baltimore family with honored service in the Revolutionary War; Mum arrived from England in 1796 and was on her second marriage. Neither was around long: David scampered off a year later, and Elizabeth soon succumbed to consumption, leaving two-year-old Edgar and his two siblings to be farmed out to various foster families. Edgar ended up with wealthy Virginia merchant John Allan and his family, but by 1815 was taken off to master Latin, French, history, and literature at an English school.

In 1826, Poe enrolled at the then-new University of Virginia, where his chief distinction was as a drinking, gambling rake. After a year, with little more than massive debts to his name and the curses of his foster father in his ears, Poe returned to Boston long enough to enlist in the Army under an assumed name (Perry). He advanced rapidly to sergeant major in an artillery regiment, serving in and around Charleston. But he shortly arranged for a substitute and quit, moving to Baltimore to live with his grandmother, an aunt, his sickly brother, and their young cousin, Virginia—whom he would later marry before her 14<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Giving up on his military career, Poe tried his hand at writing. Moving to New York, he published some poems but found his stories rejected everywhere. Nearly

starving, he pleaded for support from John Allan, to no avail. By 1835, still nearly destitute, Poe landed a job as a newspaper editor. This off-and-on career in journalism would ebb and flow over the next decade, taking Poe serially from New York to Philadelphia to Richmond with various stops in between for Providence, Baltimore, and even The Bronx.

He achieved some notoriety as a literary and dramatic critic, won plaudits for a few poems, and even made an international splash with short tales of mystery and the macabre—but could not make any of it pay, or last. He could barely support his little household of cousin-wife and mother-in-law-aunt, and struggled with drink and other demons. When Virginia died of consumption in 1845, a shattered Poe joined a temperance league and poured himself into writing.

On September 27, 1849, Poe left Richmond for New York. Stopping in Philadelphia on the way, he then vanished for a week—reappearing on October 3 in Baltimore. Barely conscious and bedraggled, he was taken to Washington College Hospital for what proved to be his last role, as a patient. Never fully recovering, Poe died in the hospital on Sunday, October 7, 1849 and was buried in Baltimore.

## EDGAR ALLAN POE

By Gavin Witt, Production Dramaturg

## Literary Criticism

Those who know us will not, from what is here premised, suppose it our intention, to enter into any wholesale laudation of "Barnaby Rudge." [...] We are not sure that the limit of critical duty is not very generally misapprehended. Excellence may be considered an axiom, or a proposition which becomes self-evident just in proportion to the clearness or precision with which it is put. [...] It is not excellence if it need to be demonstrated as such. To point out too particularly the beauties of a work, is to admit, tacitly, that these beauties are not wholly admirable. [...] In teaching what perfection is, how, in fact, shall we more rationally proceed than in specifying what it is not?

—Review of Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*

# The Many

Multi-faceted Mr. Poe, man of many homes and even more careers, appropriately produced many forms of literary output—more than one of them spawning new genres. He wrote in many voices and many guises, from non-fiction literary theory to abstruse philosophical colloquy, from landmark detective fiction to haunting gothic horror. He could appear as a dry analyst in prose, or a lush sentimentalist in verse. He gripped readers with thrilling fear, captured their imaginations with scientific speculation, and skewered his fellow writers for perceived lapses.

Hailed as the progenitor of science fiction and mystery novels alike, and the inspiration for volumes of verse and thousands of feet of film, Poe drew on a classical education and voracious reading for a wide array of sources and influences of his own. These included classical literature from Greek tragedies and Platonic dialogues to the epics of Homer

## Romantic Poetry

IT was many and many a year ago,  
In a kingdom by the sea,  
That a maiden there lived whom you may know  
By the name of ANNABEL LEE;  
And this maiden she lived with no other thought  
Than to love and be loved by me.  
I was a child and she was a child,  
In this kingdom by the sea;  
But we loved with a love that was more than love—  
I and my ANNABEL LEE—  
With a love that the wingéd seraphs of heaven  
Coveted her and me.  
—"Annabel Lee"

## Science Fiction

It is now rendered necessary that I give the facts—as far as I comprehend them myself... My attention, for the last three years, had been repeatedly drawn to the subject of Mesmerism; and, about nine months ago, it occurred to me, quite suddenly, that in the series of experiments made hitherto, there had been a very remarkable and most unaccountable omission:—no person had as yet been mesmerized in *articulo mortis*. It remained to be seen, first, whether, in such condition, there existed in the patient any susceptibility to the magnetic influence; secondly, whether, if any existed, it was impaired or increased by the condition; thirdly, to what extent, or for how long a period, the encroachments of Death might be arrested by the process.

—"The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"

## Gothic Poetry

"Prophet!" said I, "thing of evil!—  
prophet still, if bird or devil!—  
Whether Tempter sent, or whether  
tempest tossed thee here ashore,  
Desolate yet all undaunted, on this  
desert land enchanted—  
On this home by Horror haunted—  
tell me truly, I implore—  
Is there—is there balm in Gilead?—  
tell me— tell me, I implore!"  
Quoth the raven, "Nevermore."  
—"The Raven"

Rene Magritte Wilkie Collins Tim Burton Charles Addams  
Arthur Conan Doyle Verlaine Gustav Dore Gustave Courbet  
Edward Gorey Arthur Rackham Aubrey Beardsley Oscar Wilde  
M.R. James Raymond Chandler Franz Kafka D.W. Griffith David Cronenberg  
Robert L. Stevenson James Ellroy Roger Corman Odilon Redon  
Ambrose Bierce Alfred Hitchcock  
Dashiell Hammett Stanley Kubrick

# Spawn

By Gavin Witt, Production Dramaturg

# Voices of Poe

and Virgil. The metaphysics of Dante, Donne, and Milton shaped his content and his form. Romantic poets Keats, Shelley, Byron, Blake, Coleridge, Goethe, and Schiller spun their spell, as did acerbic satirists Defoe and Swift. Dickens was a contemporary and a correspondent, and Polidori's *The Vampyre* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* occupy spots of honor in his literary lineage.

A highly visual and atmospheric writer, with family roots in theater and a reputed fondness for music, Poe also exhibits the influence of artists like Bosch, Brueghel, Goya, da Vinci, Pontormo El Greco, and Tintoretto; of the Jacobean tragedies by such macabre maestros as Shakespeare, Webster, Middleton, Dekker, and Ford; and of musical sources like German *lieder* and French *chansons* as well as fantastical settings by Berlioz.

## Mystery

It may readily be supposed that the part played by my friend, in the drama at the Rue Morgue, had not failed of its impression upon the fancies of the Parisian police. With its emissaries, the name of Dupin had grown into a household word. The simple character of those inductions by which he had disentangled the mystery never having been explained even to the Prefect... it is not surprising that the affair was regarded as little less than miraculous, or that the Chevalier's analytical abilities acquired for him the credit of intuition. [A]nd the cases were not few in which attempt was made to engage his services at the Prefecture. One of the most remarkable instances was that of the murder of a young girl named Marie Rogêt.

—"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt"

## Gothic/Horror

The greater part of the fearful night had worn away, and she who had been dead, once again stirred—and now more vigorously than hitherto...The corpse, I repeat, stirred, and now more vigorously than before. The hues of life flushed up with unwonted energy into the countenance—the limbs relaxed—and, save that the eyelids were yet pressed heavily together, and that the bandages and draperies of the grave still imparted their charnel character to the figure, I might have dreamed that Rowena had indeed shaken off, utterly, the fetters of Death. But if this idea was not, even then, altogether adopted, I could at least doubt no longer, when, arising from the bed, tottering, with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded advanced bodily and palpably into the middle of the apartment.

—"Ligeia"

## Philosophy

You will remember that one or two of the wise among our forefathers...had ventured to doubt the propriety of the term "improvement," as applied to the progress of our civilization. There were periods in each of the five or six centuries immediately preceding our dissolution, when arose some vigorous intellect, boldly contending for those principles whose truth appears now, to our disenfranchised reason, so utterly obvious—principles which should have taught our race to submit to the guidance of the natural laws, rather than attempt their control. At long intervals some master-minds appeared, looking upon each advance in practical science as a retro-gradation in the true utility. [...] Yet these noble exceptions from the general misrule served but to strengthen it by opposition.

—"The Colloquy of Monos and Una"

of Poe

Mallarme Rimbaud Stephen King Daphne du Maurier  
Ray Bradbury Henry James Charles Baudelaire Sheridan Le Fanu  
Sigmund Freud H.P. Lovecraft Richard Matheson  
Maurice Ravel Jules Verne Robert Bloch Lou Reed Claude Debussy  
H.G. Wells Walt Whitman Wallace Stevens James M. Cain  
Carl Gustave Jung Jorge Luis Borges Edouard Manet



# INFINITE VARIETY,

## OR THE HAPPY PARADE OF 19TH-CENTURY AMERICAN THEATER FROM BURLESQUE TO VAUDEVILLE

BY GAVIN WITT . . . . . PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

**EDGAR ALLAN POE WAS A THEATER BABY.** For better or for worse, he was born on the road to travelling actors, and—arguably—a highly theatrical sense of spectacle, suspense, and atmosphere pervades much of his fiction. Appropriately, in translating elements of his life and work to the stage, ...Poe employs elements of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century stage of Poe's day that might not be immediately apparent. If his parents had lived long enough for Poe to see them perform, what might he have witnessed?

IN THE DECADES BETWEEN THE WAR OF 1812 AND THE CIVIL WAR, a shift towards industrial manufacturing and concurrent urban growth matched a rise in popular mass entertainment. In towns and cities aspiring to consequence, the curious and the cultured could choose from an array of entertainment options. Music, lectures, and classical theater occupied the high end of the scale. At the other end were touring circuses, freak shows and dime museums, or rowdy tent shows and medicine shows. Spanning the vast middle, in a hybrid that drew on both, blared the several forms of variety shows.

**THESE FORMS INCLUDED CONCERT-SALOONS,** minstrel shows, burlesques, pastiches, music halls, revues, spectacles, extravaganzas, and spectacular extravaganzas. Some were actually known as variety shows, and the whole panoply gradually evolved into what became known as Vaudeville. But by whatever name, certain elements held true. Variety shows comprised a series of distinct, brief scenes or vignettes known as “turns,” of widely different styles. Often with no evident scenario to unify them, they had a loose but certain structure, designed to provide rhythm, pace, and an underlying sense of unity. The turns showcased singers, acrobats and contortionists, magic routines, dance numbers, comic sketches, short plays, and anything from classical recitations to celebrity cameos. Typically, variety shows might feature about a dozen turns, each of them from five to 15 minutes long. True to their name, variety was the key, providing not only the spice of success but protection from often rowdy, even surly, audiences.

From minstrel shows and burlesques came a more cohesive, three-part structure for the evening: first, a “walk-around” and exchange of banter between comedians and an interlocutor; then, an “olio,” or variety section of diverse turns; and finally, a one-act skit to conclude. To this three-act structure with variety sketches, the musical revue added a final component of thematic and structural unity. Where the traditional variety show boasted turns that had little connection to one another—with different performers and different acts featured in each—musical revues used a single cast throughout performing sketches, songs, and dances interwoven with dialogue and story.

Out of these hybrid innovations came they heyday of Vaudeville, lasting through the 1930s. But also came a host of veterans who shaped early film and television, from the Marx Brothers to *The Honeymooners* and *I Love Lucy*, right through to the present. Were Poe to stumble on a re-run of *Seinfeld*, or the latest episode of *America's Got Talent*, he might not bat an eye.

