

Poe and Behold! America on the European Stage!

Edgar Allan Poe is primarily revered as an American writer, but I soon discovered that the European influence on his imaginary is unmistakable. Of his forty-five short stories, only thirteen are set in explicitly or implicitly American contexts; twenty unfold in European settings: Paris, London, Rotterdam, Venice, Renaissance Italy, Spain, Hungary, Gothic Germany, and the mountains of Norway. Others make its readers fare through seas, dreamscapes, metaphysical realms, treasure islands, to the far reaches of the moon, and across the Atlantic by hot-air balloon.

Although our producer, Grantly Marshall, may not have floated into Munich on a zeppelin, he certainly shares Poe's flair for crossing oceans in the mind. Partially educated in Europe, he brings fifty years of lived continental experience to what is our second American Classic collaboration. At this delicate juncture in Euro-American relations, his idea for a European tour of Poe's *oeuvre* feels not only apt, but quietly urgent – and I thank him greatly for the opportunity.

Why so Poe-faced? A Melan-poe-lic Misreading...

Poe's writing is often mistaken for being wholly melancholic and serious – understandably so, given its elegiac tone and preoccupation with death and madness. But to see only the macabre is to miss the peculiar complexity of his writing. Like comedy, horror clarifies through distortion: comedy exaggerates human folly to reveal truth; horror unsettles the familiar to uncover what lies beneath. Poe's fear doesn't arise from gore or spectacle, but from what is implied and withheld.

The prisms of Poe's prose – mellifluous, rhythmically intricate – were crafted for the page, not the stage. His dense and suggestive vocabulary, full of layered implications, presents a challenge for live performance. Rather than attempt to replicate this directly, our production seeks alternate means to conjure the dreadful beauty of his writing through alternate means. Our production seeks to emulate his elegant terror using the stage's own language of concealment and inference. We've turned to off-stage space, masks, makeup, puzzle-plotting, and cloak-and-dagger tension - devices that mirror Poe's art of implication. His world belongs neither wholly to the rational nor the supernatural, but to the *praeternatural*: that ghost-lit threshold where meaning flickers between the tangible and the intuited. It has been a privilege to explore those shadows and the silences they contain. If the term *praeternatural* is unfamiliar now, I hope by the end of the show its sensation will be instinctively known.

Stage Fright to Screen Light: My Mentors in the Macabre

Until recently, the closest I'd come to horror was the streets of South London. But in 2024, I had the privilege of assisting Robert Eggers – perhaps the most distinctive horror director of our generation – on *Nosferatu*. Working in post-production, I saw how true horror doesn't rely on spectacle, but on a forensic care for language, rhythm, and history. Bill Skarsgård's

Dracula wasn't a suave, caped seducer but a folkloric revenant: hairy, hollow, undead, and mad.

Eggers' horror is rooted in literature, and his reverence for Poe runs deep. One of his most prized possessions is a 1923 edition of *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, a gift from his longtime cinematographer. His first short film adapted *The Tell-Tale Heart*, and though now celebrated on screen, his earliest work in horror began in the theatre – with a play invited to the Edwin Booth Theatre on Broadway.

I was intrigued to discover how horror might work on stage. Over lunch with Steven Berkoff – my mentor, master of physical theatre, former Bond villain, and *Clockwork Orange* star – we spoke about the challenges of mounting Poe. He has always cautioned against directors obsessed with the genre of horror, rather than the author behind it. Like Eggers, he sees Poe not as a purveyor of fright, but as a poet of obsession, atmosphere, and occult motivation. It is a mistake to treat Poe merely as a Gothic entertainer. Poe was not an originator, but a craftsman refining old tools for new fears. To read him is to witness that precision firsthand: a proto-cinematic mind tracing dread through rhythm, detail, and silence.

From Page to Poe-formance

Poe's stories lend themselves naturally to the stage. I feel he writes, to borrow a term of his own, like a 'literary *histrion*' (Latin for stage-actor). His stories are rich with strong character, dialogue, *mise-en-scène*, intricate plot-design, and riveted with the mechanics of stagecraft: concealment, revelation, rhythm, spectacle, and dread.

In his essay *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe argues that a poetic work should be experienced 'within the limit of a single sitting.' That conscious compression of time and effect became a dramaturgical cornerstone for this production. Our decision to perform without an interval is not merely homage – it is fidelity to Poe's form. Like Poe, I believe in a distilled experience. Although Poe championed brevity in theory, his prose can be lush, labyrinthine, even florid. I share T. S. Eliot's opinion that Poe's fiction often betrayed his own aesthetic. Yet perhaps that contradiction is part of what has made him so interesting to unravel as an author in his own right. Our adaptation trims and refines, yes – but without neutering his lyric unease. We move quickly but allow the requisite sections to breathe when we need to.

When Poe composed his world-famous *The Raven*, he began with the ending – he insisted on a strong *dénouement* that would cast a retrospective spell. Following suit, I wrote the climax of this adaptation first. Our mysterious title only reveals itself at the end!

Stage Fright, Ravenous Delight

As discussed, Poe's language is dense, and as such, his plots move slowly. This poses a particular challenge for second-language theatre audiences, for whom clear action is perhaps more necessary than usual for comprehension. I have therefore focused this adaptation on the

more visceral, violent, carnivalesque parts of his *œuvre*. I think all media express themselves in their own special way, and theatre is not literature. As such, I directed our ensemble to explore Poe as flesh, not fiction. Theatre can never compete with the technical faculties of modern horror in cinema. The camera's lens lends an exquisite narrative eye for detail, and montage offers a cutting between violence and stillness perhaps even sharper than words can. However, a peculiar electricity lingers in the theatre air – a charge that thrums through the bodies of actors. When presence and precision align, the stage renders horror with an immediacy of unrivalled quality. I hope that in our adaptation horror steps off the page and into the room – not observed, but felt in the sinew, pulse, and silence of live performance.

On the The Body Poe-litic: 'Poe-s Before Hoes'

Although I'm often wary of overemphasising the link between an artist's life and their creative output, Poe's personal losses are so relentless that it feels naïve not to read them into his fiction. His father abandoned him. His mother died when he was an infant. He was separated from his siblings. His foster mother died. His uncle disowned him. His wife died. His favourite cousin, gone. His fiancée, lost. Grief – especially grief for women – saturates his writing. And yet, alongside the sorrow, there is also adoration. Poe admired women as poets and critics, praised their intellect, and wrote with tenderness about those he loved – as seen in his poem *To My Mother* and dedications in his personal letters.

But reverence is not representation. Poe's women are often idealised, distant, cadavers: the eternal feminine. He famously declared that 'the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,' and that 'the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover.' In *The Poetic Principle*, he writes that 'deep within the spirit of man [...] is a sense of the Beautiful.' These sentiments, however sincere, are not inclusive by today's standards. His treatment of women – rooted in grief and admiration – nonetheless reflects the limitations and blind spots of his time.

In adapting Poe, I wanted to breathe new air into the crypt: to evoke women who are more than pallid muses of high forehead and fragile frame. Not to erase Poe's archetypes, but to frame and counterbalance them – with contemporary voices of discovery, intelligence, even rage. Our adaptation doesn't shy away from this complexity – it embraces it through playful confrontation and living contrast.

Poe-tic Justice (Put it in a Song)

Although he is best known for his short stories, he considered himself first and foremost a poet. His poetry is densely musical – full of tremor, rhythm, and texture. His poetry is often hexametric, indubitably an influence from his reading of Latin poetry. What that means, in real terms, is that his poems jingle nicely and lend themselves excellently to being sounded aloud and in music. Vincent Price and Christopher Lee turned his words into near-incantation in their audio-book readings and one-man shows. Lou Reed (of *Velvet Underground*) wrote an entire album inspired by his poems. Poe himself claimed that 'Music, when combined with

a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea is simply music; the idea without the music is prose.' His verse sings – and so, in this adaptation, we sing too – setting it to original music. Being a former Cambridge choral scholar, I decided to arrange some tunes a cappella, drawing inspiration directly from the text itself.

Poe-sthumous Influence

Poe was a flawed writer, and our adaptation aims to acknowledge that. His style is overwrought, and his erudition – though occasionally dazzling – is at times uneven, like his literary works. Luis Borges notes that his prose can be overwritten, like the earnest outpourings of a precocious teenager. It's true to say that he was, at times, contradictory. But we should recognise that he walked so others could run. He creates the 'detective' before it is used as the noun we use today; he forebodes psychology as we know it; he is considered the 'father of horror'. Who are Freud, Kafka, Christie, Conan Doyle, and Hitchcock without Poe? He is the point of origin that cannot quite be left behind.

Even in his own time, when many contemporaries looked outward — to Empire, to nature, to moral grandeur — Poe turned inward. Tennyson hymned duty and national purpose; Browning gave voice to dukes, murderers, and mythic figures in vivid historical monologues. Whitman sought the self in the vast — in fields, cities, and the collective thrum of democracy, sketching the soul against the backdrop of a continent. But Poe worked at the scale of the intimate and the interior. He listened for the self in solitude — in the crack in the voice, the trembling hand, the knocking in the walls. His was not a poetics of expansion, but of implosion — not a celebration of the self, but an unravelling of it.

That's all Poe-lks!

More than two centuries on, his work sends a peculiar chill down the spine. There are forty-five stories. Dozens of poems. We won't do them all today. As my old man used to say: "*Always leave them wanting more, kid.*"

[No more p(oe)uns, I p(oe)romise!]

L.

Leopold Benedict,

June 2nd, 2025

Edited by Dr. Emma Cavell