

RHODE'S

In Poe's Skin

Robert T. Rhode's Reflections on Having Performed a Play As Edgar A. Poe

I last performed my play on Poe in 1994. Mine was not a costumed reading from a lectern—the form to which many Poe enactors resorted; rather, my performance was a ninety-minute, fully scripted show with a set and with a light-and-sound technician. Jeff Jerome of the Baltimore Poe Society named my play the authorized stage version of Poe's life, and he brought my drama to Baltimore for performances on Poe's birthday in 1988 and 1990. Both performances took place before standing-room-only crowds in the deconsecrated church beside Poe's grave. I was the performer in 1990 when *Life Magazine* secured an infrared photograph of the man who left cognac and roses on Poe's grave. The photographer that *Life* hired took many pictures of my show, but none of them wound up in the magazine.

In the past forty years, eighteen actors have played the rôle of Poe on stage, according to writer Michael McGlasson. I offered a fully memorized and fully staged performance with an elaborate set. I received enough invitations to perform my drama every other weekend throughout the fall and spring semesters. I gave over two hundred performances of my play *A Dream Within a Dream* during a dozen years. Thousands witnessed my drama.

This is how it all started. When I was in secondary school, one of my favorite authors was Poe. Like so many young people, I was drawn to his larger-than-life plots.



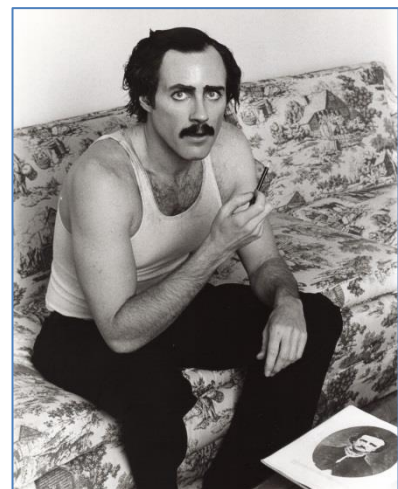
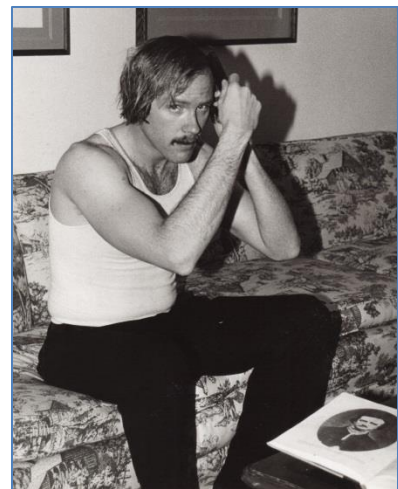
Professor Poe

Dr. Robert Rhode, English professor at Northern Kentucky University, was Edgar Allan Poe last night at Westminster Church. Here he poses in the graveyard of the church. (the Baltimore *Evening Sun*, Tuesday, January 19, 1988, page C4)

As a graduate student at Indiana University in Bloomington, I studied Poe in a course taught by Dr. J. Albert Robbins, a student of Arthur Hobson Quinn. In the last year of my PhD work at IU, a friend in theater asked me if, for her graduate course in makeup, she could use prosthetics and grease paint to transform me into Walt Whitman, the subject of my dissertation. I consented. I had only to stand center stage in the auditorium while a judging panel evaluated the makeup under lights. The committee said that I looked so much like Whitman that I should consider performing a play about the poet. After completing my PhD in early American literature, I took a tenure-track position at Northern Kentucky University, located near Cincinnati. Almost at once, I began to research and write a script for a one-person play depicting Whitman and his works. I performed the two-act drama many times, but requests for the show were relatively sporadic. It was a chore to keep two hours of material memorized in between shows that were spaced a month or more apart. As I thoroughly enjoyed performing the part of an author, I decided that, to perform more often, I would choose a writer more popular than Whitman.

I then composed a script for a play depicting the master of horror. My play had no intermission. The enactment demanded from me prodigious energy and from my audience tremendous attention. My purpose was to put before theatergoers an authentic Poe, not the Poe of popular culture. My Poe was neither a drug addict nor a drunk. My Poe was a writer's writer. My Poe loved satire, had a towering sense of humor, screamed boo, winked, and smirked. My Poe changed costumes onstage to become the quirky narrators in "To Helen," "Berenice," and "The Raven." My Poe made "Berenice" a belly-laughing favorite of Jeff Jerome. My Poe quoted from his letters, essays, and reviews so as to give a nuanced depiction of the author. Again and again, my portrayal was tempered in the crucible of public opinion.

When I started out, I used latex bags beneath my eyes, but, after a Cincinnati performance as Mark Twain, Hal Holbrook took a question from me and described a brush technique giving the illusion of bags. After that, there were no more appliances and bottles of spirit gum for me!



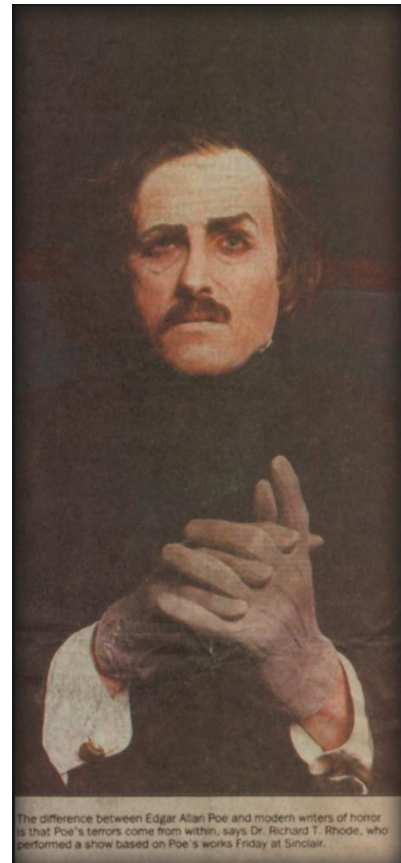
To change me from a blond professor to a dark-haired Edgar A. Poe meant a makeup process requiring six hours. The style of makeup varied depending on whether the audience was close to me or far away, but the time it took to prepare Poe's face remained the same. The heaviness of the makeup in various photographs of me as Poe indicates that the performance was to be given in a large auditorium having a proscenium arch. My makeup was less stark for theaters in the round and for small venues. Here you see steps in the make-up process before the application of powder that softened the look considerably. The photographs were taken in 1987 by Jack Jeffers.

I wonder if my fellow Poe portrayers experienced as many odd coincidences as I did. One of the first occurred before Zane Harris brought to my play his genius for light-and-sound technology. In those earliest years, I was hauling my meager set in my car. Back then, mine was truly a one-person show. It was nearly midnight when I finished packing my Cutlass after a performance at a church in Cincinnati. While I initially thought it a little odd that a church had requested a play on Poe, I reminded myself that Poe was no worshipper of the devil. Figures representing the devil featured in only four of his stories, and most—perhaps all—of them were comical. Even though much of Poe's fiction and poetry outwardly interrogated standard morality, his stories and poems customarily upheld moral principles after first subjecting them to intense scrutiny. I suffered no pangs of conscience in portraying Poe within a church. After cramming the last box in the trunk, I returned to the sanctuary to thank my host, who was, I thought, the only other person still on the premises. I shook his hand, exited the building, and strode down the narrow sidewalk toward my car. I glanced up to see a man walking toward me. I assumed that he had attended the show, had accidentally left behind gloves or reading glasses, and had come back to the church to reclaim his belongings. I nodded a greeting, stepped aside to let him pass, and suddenly went cold. He had vanished! I felt that I had positively seen his face, his tie, and his coat. Since that time, I have explained the matter as a visual memory—a trick played on my eyes. I reasoned that, when I left my host standing in the brightly lighted interior of the church and immediately plunged into the darkness of the parking lot, my retinas had recorded the picture of my host, and it was his image that I mistook for a substantial person. Undermining this explanation are the facts that my car was parked beneath a security light and that I had walked a considerable distance prior to my encounter.

Several years later, Zane and I were traveling to Virginia for a performance at Radford University. I was driving Zane's blue Chevrolet van that was stuffed full of theater lights, sound equipment, and assorted items for the set, including an oversized chair that made me look proportionately shorter.

My height was over six feet: too tall for Poe. Before I could react to the sight of a large black bird lifting its wings to try to gain altitude, I struck and killed the raven. Zane calmly said, "Put it out of your mind." He knew that my temperament was inclined to be nervous, and he did not want the ominous death of the bird to mar my performance the next evening. I managed to take Zane's advice, and, during the show, the unfortunate raven was excluded from my thoughts. All went well in the theater, but, in moments of reflection in the years since the occurrence, I have wondered what meaning, if any, the incident portended.

My play included a slightly abbreviated version of Poe's early satirical story "Berenice," which ends with the narrator's horrified discovery that, while out of his mind, he has extracted his wife's teeth. For my performances, I used real human teeth, which, in between shows, I kept in a solution of formaldehyde. In a box lying on the table on stage were more teeth than ever were found in a human mouth. Replete with many live candles, my set was also stocked with tin plates, cups, and bowls so that the narrator's frantic hurling of the teeth would strike up a tinkling symphony as bicuspid and molars pinged and ricocheted off metal objects. In large theaters, teeth bounced into the orchestra pit and made chimes of music stands. As I seldom found all the teeth again after the shows, I often wondered if broom-wielding custodians felt revulsion when they swept gold-crowned molars from under grand pianos. Once, Zane and I were in Bowling Green, Ohio, for a theater-in-the-round performance. Although the house seated a large number of people, no one was more than fifty feet from the central platform stage. Accordingly, everyone had an excellent view. The night was bitterly cold with a foot of snow on the ground. Even under such inclement conditions, so many Poe fans came to the show that several had to be turned away. Happy to be among the lucky guests nestled in a warm auditorium, the crowd was predisposed toward having an enjoyable evening. The play went exceptionally well. When I threw the teeth at the climactic moment in "Berenice," a



The difference between Edgar Allan Poe and modern writers of horror is that Poe's terrors come from within says Dr. Robert T. Rhode, who performed a show based on Poe's works Friday at Sinclair. (the *Dayton Daily News*, Saturday, April 15, 1989, page 1A)

heavy molar landed atop a candle and miraculously stuck in the wax. The formaldehyde in the cavities of the tooth burst into a flame at least two feet tall. Perhaps the force of the blast removed the oxygen, but, for whatever reason, the taper was extinguished. The molar, which was still clinging to the tip of the candle, had turned jet black. In the receiving line after the show, witness after witness asked me, "How did you do the trick with the tooth?" "That's my secret!" I replied. Although I tried thereafter, I never succeeded in replicating the flame-throwing molar—and, although I earned many standing ovations for my performances, I never received a heartier one than that of the audience in Bowling Green.

Throughout the years that I became Poe for crowds across the eastern half of America, I was serving as the first director of NKU's Honors Program. One year, the National Collegiate Honors Council met in Baltimore. It happened to be in the autumn of the same year that I had performed my play in the same city. I had several students participating in the honors convention, and I drove them to Baltimore. It was about 9:30 p.m. in late October, and my passengers had fallen asleep by the time our van was passing through the suburbs. I decided to take the students to see Poe's grave before checking in to our hotel. I parked in front of Westminster Church. The awaking slumberers rubbed their eyes and asked, "Where are we?" With a tone of mystery, I said, "Follow me." I led them to the Poe monument near the gate, and they were suitably impressed. Next, I took the students on a tour behind the somber church to view the raven marker so well known to Poe aficionados.

All at once, the small lights beside the sidewalk went out. At that hour of night, I needed only a second or two to realize that the cemetery was being closed. The students and I sprinted for the front gate but were too late. It was secured with a padlock, and the person that had locked it was nowhere to be seen. Now that we were imprisoned within Poe's cemetery, a few of the students were genuinely afraid. We set out to find a place to exit, but there was none. Downcast, we returned to the gate. I concluded that we would have to climb the brick wall, which was surmounted with black iron spikes. The students were sufficiently agile to place their toes in the mortared crevices between the bricks and, thus, to scale the barricade. With care, they swung over the ironwork and dropped to the sidewalk on the side of freedom. Like the captain of a doomed ship, I went last. I struggled to reach the top, and, by an astonishing effort, I gained the uppermost course of bricks. I was in the act of gingerly swinging a leg over the iron spikes when two women came down the walk. They held bags of popcorn. "What are you doing?" one of them asked me. I explained and gestured toward the padlock. They smiled in sympathy. The other said, "You should come here in

January. There's a big celebration in the church to commemorate Poe's birthday. Last January, an actor played the part of Poe. He was terrific. You should've seen him." I beamed and said, "I was that actor!" Their smiles turned to looks of fear. The thought that they were conversing with a mendacious person in the nighttime act of climbing over a cemetery fence sent them running down the sidewalk, popcorn flying from their bags. Then I remembered that, without the makeup and costume, I looked nothing like Poe. While I clumsily cleared the spikes and jumped down, I muttered something about being more frightening than Poe was. My feet stung when they hit the concrete, but I was otherwise unscathed. The students who were on that trip to Baltimore so many years ago still talk thrillingly about the night they were locked in Poe's graveyard, and I still thank my lucky stars that no students were injured in scaling the wall.

Representing Poe is not a proposition to be taken lightly. After all, the portrayal is likely to resonate in the memories of the audience for years to come. I accepted my responsibility with a grave sobriety in contrast to the irony, satire, and humor that I projected during my play. From having *been* Poe for theatergoers when I was between twenty-nine and thirty-nine years of age, and from having studied Poe extensively for forty years, I have come to consider him one of the greatest geniuses that this country has produced. His intelligence far exceeded that of his fellow publishers and of most of his fellow authors. He heralded advances in a host of fields—notably in science—while perfecting the short story, defining detective fiction, exploring the psychological dimensions of crime fiction, hinting at science fiction, laying the groundwork for fantasy, and mocking Gothic horror so well that, for many readers on whom satire is lost, Poe became the most Gothic of all Gothic writers. Again and again in his short lifetime, Poe invoked dark atmospheric effects that never fail to lure curious and unsuspecting readers into contemplation of truly terrible deeds. Cathartic? Perhaps, but, more often than not, the distant ironical laughter is Poe's. Please permit me to explain.

Here is how to write Gothic horror of the eighteenth-century British variety:

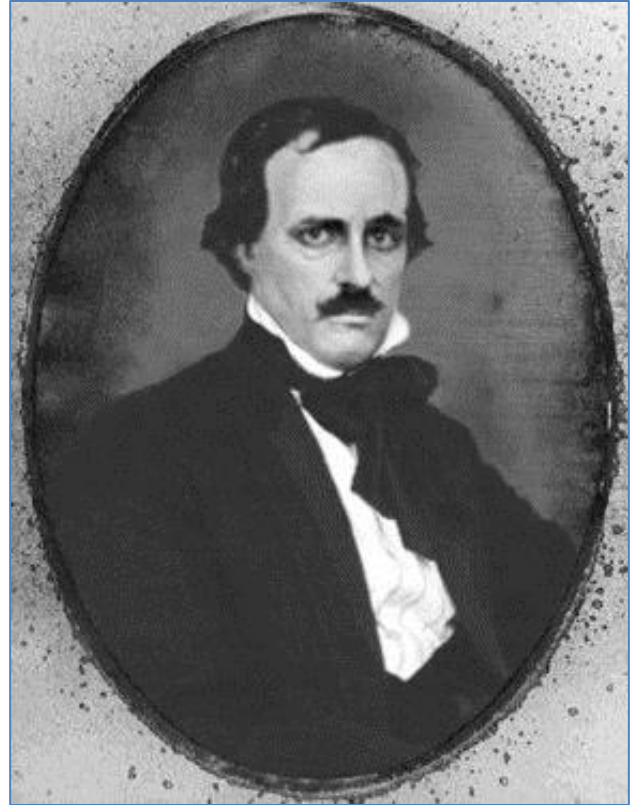
- Set your story in a gloomy castle having an oubliette.
- Contrive secret passageways through which your villains escape after having committed their fell deeds.
- Concentrate on atmosphere (gray, only gray), suspense (action, more and more action), and surprise (shocking conclusions).
- Create a fragile and melancholy heroine who sees too many ghosts.
- Invent a clumsy, inadequate, or malevolent version of the visionary hero found in Romanticism, Gothicism's close cousin.

- Inspire terror in your readers by punctuating the narrative with hideous screams emanating from remote turrets.
- Lavish attention on the pathos of characters that run amuck toward midnight.
- Show the increasingly deranged state of a character having great power and influence over others.
- Portray in delectable detail a macabre, violent scene.
- Sprinkle your narrative with scarcely veiled allusions to evil forces but do not permit the black arts to be the sole explanation for the twists in your plot.
- Depict characters who speak to the spirits of deceased loved ones—or do so yourself.
- Exploit your bad dreams.
- At story's end, pen a halfhearted, dissatisfying moral; this stratagem will help ensure that no one confuses your writing with that of Shakespeare.

When Poe was setting out to be a writer and editor with hopes of becoming a publisher, such Gothic fiction was in vogue in the United States. He seized the largely British form, reinvented it, and set expectations for it while satirizing it. Even his most famous tales of horror contain deadly puns and other scarcely concealed verbal jokes that fracture the serious veneer of his work. This is an irony that borders on paradox, but I feel that it must be understood before tackling Poe's works: Poe became one of the greatest Gothic writers of all time despite the fact that he deconstructed Gothic literature's claims. It was as if he were saying "I am not a Gothic writer" while, all the time, the public were saying "Yes, you are!" Anyone doubting this possibility would do well to read in succession "How to Write a Blackwood Article" and "A Predicament."

I deliberately used the verb "deconstructed" a moment ago. When Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida's battle over "The Purloined Letter" was front and center in English graduate school courses, I was slated to perform my play at Loyola University in Chicago. On the day before the show, I was the guest of a graduate seminar. In trying to answer questions from the students and faculty, I abruptly realized that Poe invented the literary theory of deconstruction when he wrote "The Purloined Letter." The concept that two sensible readers can apply opposite meanings to vacant or undecidable literature is encoded in Poe's story. All that remained was for Derrida to give Poe's theory a name and a definition. I do not consider it an exaggeration to say that Poe created deconstructionism.

Was Poe as great a poet as he was a writer of fiction? Years ago, I gave a talk on Poe at a scholarly conference. I praised his theories of poetic composition. I was pleased with myself and looked forward to questions from my audience. In the back row, a professor that happened to be an august Poe scholar stood up, cleared his throat, and exclaimed, "What is this love-fest for Poe? He was an awkward writer at best and a lousy poet at worst!" The professor continued, pointing out apparently ridiculous puns in several of Poe's supposedly serious stories, as well as odorously awful lines in the poems. I recall his citing the second stanza from "For Annie":



Dr. Robert T. Rhode in the rôle of Edgar Allan Poe

Sadly, I know
I am shorn of my strength,
And no muscle I move
As I lie at full length—
But no matter!—I feel
I am better at length.

The expert's frank expression of opinion left me feeling dumbstruck. I wanted to crawl into a corner and huddle in a fetal curl. I made a few inane statements in lieu of a response and sat down. Ever since that occasion, I have taken quite studiously what the professor in my audience said. Of course, he was only right. Over the years, I have begun to consider many of Poe's poems as containing satirical elements and moments of gaming. By "gaming," I refer to the kinds of word games that Poe and his wife, Virginia, enjoyed together. I have found that, when in doubt about Poe's intentions, the wisest policy is never to rule out humor as perhaps his foremost motivation. Poe's humor takes many forms ranging from the obviously comical to the intellectually sophisticated.

In my experience, the best teachers of Poe were the thousands of people in my audiences and in the university classes that I was frequently permitted to address. By gauging their oohs and ahs, their gasps and guffaws, I learned what worked in Poe's stories and poems. Here is a case in point: the members of an audience in Detroit taught me how funny "Berenice" is; they laughed whether I wanted them to or not! Poe had captured the magic. All I had to do was release it, and my audiences showed me the ways. Various people are attracted to Poe for various reasons. He left noteworthy compositions in so many genres and sub-genres that practically everyone can find passages to applaud. Poe biography appeals to me because of Poe's essential humanity. To paraphrase Faulkner, Poe strove—against daunting odds—to write memorably upon the wall of oblivion. Poe enjoyed triumphs, and he suffered failures. He knew laughter and love and the loss of love. Who cannot identify with a life lived so fully and yet so mercurially? For me, Poe's literary works are attractive because they are so intellectually rich. With the stroke of one pen, Poe composed simultaneously for many kinds of readers. He wrote for those that adhere to the plot and seldom or never look beyond it, but he also wrote for those that hunt along the same hidden thematic trails that Poe himself explored. He condescended to amateur readers (without such readers' realization), and, at once, he wickedly punctured the pomposity of elite readers (without their full cognizance). Most importantly, he cleverly rewarded readers that were sufficiently intelligent to work slowly and carefully toward a grasp of Poe's wisdom. It takes not only a keen mind but also a persevering brain to glimpse the Olympus of Poe's genius.

Given the chance, I would urge readers to recognize that not all sources on Poe are equal. Oftentimes, those scholars that began publishing their findings in the middle or in the latter half of the twentieth century made—and make—the most reliable authorities. In my view, readers that earnestly desire knowledge and understanding of Poe and his work should forgo the opinions of those errant knaves that are unable to provide evidence that they have devoted the necessary time and energy to discover the real Poe through dedicated study of his writing and that of renowned scholars.

One of my greatest joys resulted from the National Endowment for the Humanities grant entitled "A Paradigm of the Integration of Scholarship and Classroom Practice through the Study of Edgar Allan Poe," 1990–91. A team of area high school teachers and I met once a month for a year to discuss Poe's biography and his works so as to brainstorm effective ways to teach students about Poe.

I have been mulling over what I could say about Poe in film. I am not an expert on Poesque cinema. I can tell you that I have felt cinematic adaptations of Poe stories and poems to be more nearly a reflection of their times than effective entries into Poe biography or literary theory. Perhaps the difference between stage and film lies at the heart of my mistrust of movies about Poe. I never perceived my fellow stage actors as rivals; rather, I always considered them to be going about their performances honestly. Even though we seldom corresponded with each other, we were generally aware of what each of us was doing to bring Poe to life. We stage actors were a fraternity of Poes, every avatar of which was a potentially authentic version of the author. When I have seen actors attempt to portray Poe on screen (no matter what the era in which the film was produced), I have felt a keen motivation to accuse them of pandering to popular culture. Also, I have felt many of them oddly lifeless. Are Poe's works more theatrical than cinematic? In turn, is Poe himself more suited to a spotlight than to a collection of camera angles? Insofar as the stage emphasizes the spoken word, perhaps the stage is where such a writer as Poe belongs. I need not mention his thespian parents, his keen observation of speech, his theories about the failure of communication, or the way that his relatively short life divides into acts as though he had lived a play. More importantly, the stage captivates theatergoers because the actions on that stage are timed to the immediate response of the crowd. When I performed as Poe, I knew from the first second to the next and the next that I was engaged in a grimly hilarious ballet with every person in my audience and with all of them together. My play might have been described by the adjective "one-person," but I was constantly aware that my play numbered as many players as there were people in the house. Maybe Poe's life and words (spoken and unspoken) must be relived uniquely moment-to-moment and never the same way twice.