

Edgar Allan Poe's

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Adapted by Linda Manning

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collaboration with **Groundwerx Dance Theatre** at The Chelsea  
Playhouse, New York, New York, December, 1995

Adapted by Linda Manning  
Directed and Music-scored by Douglas Wagner

William Hawken . . . . .	Derek Stearns
Roderick Usher . . . . .	Michael Pinney
Madeline Usher . . . . .	Linda Manning
House . . . . .	Heather Ahern
	Peter Bramante
	Donna Meierdiercks
	Cathy Nicoli

Time: 1845

Place: Countryside of Cape Cod, Massachusetts

Characters:

William Hawken - 40, any ethnicity, plain, sturdy, curious

Roderick Usher - 35, any ethnicity, tall, very thin,  
handsome and delicate with a focus perpetually turned inward

Madeline Usher - 35, any ethnicity, strikingly beautiful, a  
strong, powerful woman with the haunted look of a captive

Dancers/House - four professional dancers, any age and  
ethnicity

**ACT ONE**

*(The set should suggest an ancient broken down mansion. This could be done with an actual set, various levels, or with only light. Although the characters move through many different rooms in the house and there are long passages of time, this does not need to be done literally, it can be suggested with stylized movement and light. There should never be a blackout or break in the action.)*

*There is a large, ornate Gothic style chair primarily used by Roderick, and a dining table with three chairs. The table top opens up, serving later in the play as a coffin. Everything is on wheels.*

*The house/servants are played by FOUR DANCERS. Their movements are highly stylized. The three actors could perform in a broad, theatrical style suggesting Poe's melodramatic world, but should always be grounded in psychological and emotional truth.*

*The play opens with a short choreographed scene in which William's household servants [the dancers] establish the frantic world of William's business. A messenger/dancer makes his/her way across the heath to William's house during this monologue. William enters into the action. He is 40 years old, a sturdy, plain man.)*

WILLIAM

*(He is holding a letter.)*

Sick. I am sick. Joseph, he doesn't want to pay me yet. Mr. Hughes wants the second shipment on credit. What should I do? He doesn't want to pay me? I've never heard of such a thing. "One more month," he insists that I extend his

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

credit. He promised me I would have his payment today. He seemed like an honest man. Joseph, get me the large brown folder on top of my desk, cancel my appointment this afternoon.

*(He examines the contents of the folder.)*

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

Oh my God, his shipment has gone to the station. Bill! Billy, immediately. Gather every bill of lading and run as fast as you can to the station. If our shipment goes out on that train we're all in trouble. It's the only thing I own that's worth anything. If you don't get the goods back ... don't bother coming back at all. Hurry Bill! Joseph, what are we going to do if he doesn't pay?

Pauline! Get a letter dispatched at once to Mr. Hughes in Philadelphia. *(to Joseph)* What do you think I should say? Inform him that I am holding his second shipment. Tell him that if he does not pay his old bill at once as well as pay me cash for this present shipment, I will have him arrested and I will sell his goods to his competitor. Is that too strong? No. It's alright. That's all.

*(Bang! Bang! Bang! A loud knocking is heard as the messenger waits.)*

What is that?! It's the bank officer. I told them I would have the money today. I can't stall them any longer ... I've given them every excuse. They've been lenient. *(Bang! Bang! Bang!)* I was suppose to have payment from Philadelphia today. Damn Joseph! *(Bang! Bang! Bang!)* Stall him. They'll take my business ... don't let him in ... and my house. I'm not here. *(Bang! Bang! Bang!)* Say anything. *(Bang! Bang! Bang!)* Has Billy returned? *(Bang! Bang! Bang!)* Somebody!

*(Bang! Bang! Joseph/dancer opens the door, the messenger tumbles through it with Roderick's letter in hand and places it in front of William. Everyone stops dead and stares at the letter.)*

*(Roderick is seated in his chair upstage. He is 35, tall, very thin,*

*handsome and delicate with a focus  
perpetually turned inward.)*

RODERICK

Dear William. Intimate friend of my youth, do you remember me? Many times I have thought of you these past years. I have followed your success and respectfully offer my congratulations. I write to you, I admit, abruptly and unexpectedly. I write to you in need of your aid, your assistance, your favor. Read on, my oldest and dearest-- indeed my only personal friend--that I may elucidate upon the nature of my difficulty.

*(During this speech the  
servants/dancers bring on William's  
riding cloak, suitcase and bicycle.)*

RODERICK (CONT'D)

I regret that I am not well. You have known me, perhaps, to have a peculiar sensibility of temperament. I fear that my extreme acuteness of the senses has escalated. I now suffer from a malady stemming from a constitutional and family evil. I despair daily to find a remedy for this nervous affliction which will undoubtedly soon pass off. I can only endure the most insipid food. Fabrics other than softest cottons and silks send my skin into detestable rash. I find the odors of flowers, grass, or even dust to be oppressive. My eyes are tortured by even the faintest light. There are but few sounds, even music, which do not inspire me with horror. I must perish in this deplorable state. Thus, thus, and not otherwise shall I be lost. I write to implore you for your company.

*(Will puts on his cloak, grabs his  
suitcase, gets on his bicycle and  
begins his journey across the heath.)*

WILLIAM

I won't be gone long. I think it's a wise trip don't you? Who knows what I'll find. I can't ignore this letter Joseph, the man sounds too distraught.

When we get a response from Philadelphia, you know what to do. If there is payment enclosed, send off the shipment, if not, hold onto it until I get back. It will be an experience, eh?!

RODERICK

How can I survive the boredom of my restriction to bed without the cheerful company of my dearest friend? I beg you to leave the city at once and redeem a dying soul with your amiable visit. How I long to reminisce with you about our boyhood now long-lost. How I hope to laugh once again at your friendly voice and jocular manner. Please come to share the comfort of my home, dear William, for as long a visit as you can make. Your every comfort will be my concern. I am made merry with the prospect of being with you once again.

With loving respect...Roderick Usher.

MADELINE

*(voice over from off stage)*

The garden is going to look absolutely spectacular this year. I've made up my mind. I'm finally going to do it. A blue, purple, and red color scheme. Roses everywhere. And lots of weedy looking things. I don't know all their names yet, but Roderick promised to find me a book. There will be fountains and trellises and stone pathways. Pretty benches to sit and pass the hours away. Roderick says I'll have a hard time getting my hands dirty. That's nonsense.

*(William almost reaches the House and then the dancers manipulate him through a rigorous series of physical obstacles and difficulties which make it almost impossible for him to reach the door of the House. William feels the dancers/house around him throughout the play but he cannot see them.)*

*(William is finally thrown into the House. Lights reveal Roderick in his chair. There are two large wolfhounds (marionettes) flanking Roderick on each side of his chair. They move simultaneously in response to whatever catches Roderick's attention.)*

RODERICK

Who are you?

WILLIAM

It's William, Roderick.

RODERICK

Who?

WILLIAM

William Hawken.

RODERICK

Who are you? You don't know who you are! Who in the Savior's name brought you here?

WILLIAM

I received your letter. I have come, Roderick! Are you alright?

RODERICK

What do you want? I will order the dogs to tear out your throat.

WILLIAM

I have come to see about you...to cheer you back to...

RODERICK

Take my hand. *(he does)* My God. You came.

WILLIAM

I left Boston as soon as I could make reasonable arrangements.

RODERICK

Pour me another drink, won't you?

WILLIAM

How long have you sat here drinking?

RODERICK

I'm not sure.

WILLIAM

Why so solemn, Roderick? Are you glad to see me?

*(no response)*

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

It is far too dark in here. Let me light a lamp!

RODERICK

I can see you.

*(long pause where William is lost for  
speech)*

RODERICK (CONT'D)

What do you want?

WILLIAM

I want to light a lamp so that I may see you. I have come  
all this way to help...

RODERICK

NO LIGHT. NO LIGHT!!

WILLIAM

What's the matter with you? Damned if you are not stranger  
than I even remember. I can leave.

RODERICK

Stay. In this unnerved condition I feel that the period  
will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and  
reason together.

WILLIAM

What are you talking about?

RODERICK

You don't know. I am grateful to you for coming. If you  
will excuse me, I must return to my rest. The household is  
yours. Tomorrow we will eat and drink and remember. Now I  
bid you goodnight.

WILLIAM

That's all?

RODERICK

Good Night.

*(William gathers his things and the  
dancers/house shepherd him out of the  
room. Roderick is alone on stage with  
his dogs. Madeline, who was lurking in  
the dark during the last scene enters.  
She is 35, strikingly beautiful, a*

*strong, powerful woman with the haunted  
look of a captive.)*

Who was that? MADELINE

I said "Good night!" RODERICK

Roderick. Who ... MADELINE

Madeline? RODERICK

Who was that? MADELINE

What do you mean? RODERICK

Who were you talking to? MADELINE

Myself. RODERICK

Someone just left the room. MADELINE

The physician. He's very concerned ... my blood pressure is extremely high ... he warned me about apoplexy and consumption. My God if consumption gets into this house ... RODERICK

What are you doing here?

I heard voices. MADELINE

When did you wake up? RODERICK

Hours ago. Who was that Roderick? MADELINE

RODERICK

The physician, he came to see about my ...

If you don't believe me, get out.

Don't go. I'm sorry.

MADELINE

Is he gone?

RODERICK

Yes.

I went looking for you yesterday. I got worried. You'd been quiet for so long. I couldn't find you anywhere.

MADELINE

I fell asleep in mother's room.

RODERICK

I know.

MADELINE

You found me?

RODERICK

Yes.

MADELINE

Why did you leave me up there? I was freezing.

RODERICK

I thought you wanted to be there.

MADELINE

I'm going back to my room.

RODERICK

Why? Stay here. Oh! I almost forgot. (*he runs to get a book*) I've got a surprise for you.

MADELINE

What?

RODERICK

I found one you haven't read.

It was in here. Hidden behind some others. If you'd come see me more often you ...

MADELINE

What is it?

RODERICK

Come see for yourself.

MADELINE

You're sure I haven't read it?

RODERICK

Oh yes.

MADELINE

How?

RODERICK

It's old, very old, and the pages have not been touched by anyone for some time.

MADELINE

It is wonderful?

RODERICK

I haven't read it. I've been saving it for you, but I suspect it's a masterpiece.

MADELINE

Someone we know?

RODERICK

No. A new author ... complete surprise.

MADELINE

Give it to me.

RODERICK

Did you hear what I said? If you would come in here occasionally ... you would know whether or not I had a surprise for you.

MADELINE

Please give me the book.

Roderick.

RODERICK

No.

You don't speak to me for weeks and then ...

You don't even have the decency to pretend.

MADELINE

I assume pretending would insult you.

RODERICK

You're wrong. Pretend.

MADELINE

What?

RODERICK

That you like me.

MADELINE

Roderick, give me the book.

RODERICK

Pretend!

MADELINE

Please give me the book. Please. Roderick. I would very much like to read the book.

RODERICK

That's what I thought. That's why I saved it for you.

MADELINE

Please ...

RODERICK

I was thinking of you.

MADELINE

Give me the damn book!

*(He throws it at her.)*

MADELINE (CONT'D)

It's children's arithmetic.

RODERICK

You never studied mathematics ... you haven't read it. It's old. It was lost. I thought you would like it. I know you want ...

MADELINE

Another person in this house is not going to change anything for you Roderick.

*(She exits, leaving Roderick alone.)*

*William discovers his room, escorted by the house/dancers, who disappear promptly into the darkness. Thunderstorm. Wolves howling, etc. William prepares for bed. A loud banging is heard from below. He looks out the window for the source of the sound. Nothing. As he climbs into bed, he sees dark figures passing in the recesses of the narrow room. They are the dead Usher ancestors. William takes his candle to the end of the room where the figures are moving. When he gets there, there is nothing but walls. He returns to his bed. The figures reappear. He goes again to where they are. They disappear. He returns to his bed, they reappear. He takes his candle to the end of the room. No figures. He leaves his candle and goes to his bed. Suddenly, with a shriek of music, Madeline appears briefly. Then he is alone. He tries to sleep.)*

*(Morning. Roderick is looking much better than he did the night before. He is dressed in a smart jacket or robe and seems rested. William is heard yelling Roderick's name before he enters the room. He enters shaken, out of breath, and half dressed, carrying his jacket and tie.)*

WILLIAM

Roderick! Roderick! RODERICK!

RODERICK

What is it William? What's wrong?

WILLIAM

Last night ... this morning I got up and started to dress.  
I'm sure I heard voices ...

RODERICK

Yes.

WILLIAM

... a man and a woman ... talking about nothing ...

RODERICK

Hah.

WILLIAM

... it didn't make sense -- and then last night I saw ...

RODERICK

Will ... please ... sit down. Tell me everything.

WILLIAM

This house, Roderick. It's very odd.

RODERICK

Exactly what did you see?

WILLIAM

You'll think I'm crazy.

RODERICK

No I won't.

WILLIAM

People. Figures at one end of my room.

RODERICK

What were they doing?

WILLIAM

When I took my candle to look there was nothing. I would  
walk away and then they would be there again.

RODERICK

Moving along the walls?

WILLIAM

Yes. How did you know?

I saw a woman.

RODERICK

Really?

WILLIAM

Yes.

RODERICK

Listen to me William. This house has been here for two centuries, maybe longer, built from porous stone. When you rode in did you notice the growth that covers most of the house?

WILLIAM

Yes.

RODERICK

It's a plant that extends down into the water.

WILLIAM

Right.

RODERICK

The house has been covered with these living things -- these plants -- since long before I was born. The plants are rooted in the stone in places.

WILLIAM

Yes?

RODERICK

Don't you see -- as you said, it has a mind of its own.

WILLIAM

Roderick.

RODERICK

Think about it.

WILLIAM

You can't believe that. You don't think the house made me see things last night?

RODERICK

What could make more sense. My life is no longer my own. This house, this living, growing fungi, it has a consciousness, an awareness of you and me right now.

*(pause)*

RODERICK (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I should have sent someone up this morning to bring you down.

WILLIAM

Who?

RODERICK

One of the servants.

WILLIAM

Oh. Yes. Of course.

Roderick, are you alright? Last night, you didn't know who I was.

What is it?

RODERICK

Quite simply. You've saved my life.

WILLIAM

No ... what's happened Roderick?

RODERICK

I am putrefying.

WILLIAM

In your letter you said you can't eat, and something about your clothes bothering you. Do you have a doctor?

RODERICK

You came.

WILLIAM

Believe it.

RODERICK

I've ... I've been here alone for so long ...

WILLIAM

You're going to come back to the city with me and we're going to get you proper care.

RODERICK

I worked very hard and no one else seems to understand that. My father died. I took his business. He collected -- rugs, furniture, valuables, sculpture, chandeliers, these candlesticks, Art. I took it. I was too young when he died so it stopped for a few years, but then I took it. That's what you do. No one seems to understand that. It's real work. You have to have an eye. You have to know what you are looking at. You have to care about these things.

WILLIAM

Of course.

RODERICK

It takes patience and a great deal of time, years .... Results are not immediate and even then, at times, it's not clear what you've done. But you know years of your life have been involved and you've tried.

WILLIAM

Yes.

RODERICK

So you keep trying I suppose. Right. So that's what you do?

WILLIAM

Your own business takes a lot of time ...

RODERICK

It's not the business William. The business is here. It's done. It always has been. I have more money than my grandchildren could spend. It's your life I mean.

WILLIAM

Yes. What about it?

RODERICK

Where has your life gone?

WILLIAM

You are asking me?

RODERICK

I am sick.

WILLIAM

We should leave for the city tomorrow.

RODERICK

The House and I are putrefying at exactly the same rate.

WILLIAM

What?

RODERICK

Something is rotting, you throw it out right?

WILLIAM

I suppose. What's going on? What are you talking about?!  
Why am I here?

RODERICK

Are you hungry?

WILLIAM

Yes ... I was.

*(Roderick motions and three  
servants/dancers enter. They seat  
William in a chair with perfect  
precision as if they have done this a  
million times. One carries a tray with  
coffee, cream, sugar, toast and fruit  
and feeds him. Another brushes his hair  
and finishes his tie. The third starts  
in on an expert shoe shine. William is,  
of course, thrown off but delighted.)*

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

Well ...

RODERICK

What is it you do William?

WILLIAM

You said in your letter you had been following my career.

RODERICK

That's correct.

*(very long pause)*

WILLIAM

Textiles. I sell fabric.

RODERICK

Do you enjoy it?

WILLIAM

Well ... not at the moment.

RODERICK

Why did you choose it?

WILLIAM

My father worked on the docks unloading fishing boats. Every night he brought home bluefish for dinner. I knew I had to find something else. To this day I can't eat fish.

RODERICK

I'll tell the cook.

Have you married?

WILLIAM

No.

RODERICK

No children then?

WILLIAM

Of course not.

RODERICK

You're content then?

WILLIAM

Yes.

*(Roderick sends the servant/dancers abruptly away.)*

*(pause)*

RODERICK

What was it about my letter that made you come?

WILLIAM

I have to tell you I was absolutely shocked to receive it, but it couldn't have come at a better time ... I was pleasantly surprised.

RODERICK

It was a good time for you to travel?

WILLIAM

Well ... yes ...

RODERICK

Yes?

WILLIAM

I thought it would be nice for us to see each other again ... as you said in your letter.

RODERICK

It is rather amazing that you dropped everything and came out here.

WILLIAM

You wrote a persuasive letter ...

*(Referring to Roderick's chair.)*

WILLIAM (CONT'D)

What do you call this?

RODERICK

My treasure.

WILLIAM

No. I mean ... the period and ... I don't know the correct terms ... the style.

RODERICK

This is an exceptional piece of work. Feel the wood. It is full of detail and history. I believe it's from the seventeenth century. Quite an unusual piece actually. Notice the work on the legs and this leg in particular has some peculiar markings.

*(Beat. Same day, but time has passed.)*

WILLIAM

The man is well known, very successful, it didn't occur to me that he couldn't pay.

RODERICK

You sent him your entire inventory of cloth in the first shipment ...

WILLIAM

Wool and silk, imported, very fine quality.

RODERICK

I'm sure. You sent your entire inventory on credit?

WILLIAM

Yes. Many people operate on credit. You should know that. I was just giving him some time to work with and he assured me the payment was on its way.

RODERICK

Then he orders a second shipment?

WILLIAM

I was ecstatic.

RODERICK

Of course.

WILLIAM

My inventory was cleaned out so I bought a second and third stock from overseas entirely on credit ... one load for him and the third stock to replenish my inventory. With the amount he was paying for the two shipments I was ... am still going to make a sizeable profit.

RODERICK

Then you received his letter saying he couldn't pay you?

WILLIAM

The second shipment was already at the railway station.

RODERICK

You sent the second shipment off to him without payment for the first!?

WILLIAM

It was coming. I'm a man of my word, I expect others to be as well.

I couldn't believe the letter came asking for an extension on his credit.

RODERICK

So what are you going to do?

WILLIAM

I'm waiting to hear from my bookkeeper if payment has arrived. Meanwhile, my man overseas is waiting for me to pay him. If I don't ... if he ever even got wind that I was having a problem, my credibility would be severely damaged.

You know how these things work. Reputations travel fast, especially bad ones.

RODERICK

I'm in love, William. I've in love with an extraordinary, brilliant, lovely, perfect girl.

WILLIAM

That's wonderful. Roderick. I'm as jealous as I can be.

RODERICK

That's why I asked you here.

WILLIAM

All this sickness is because of love?

My God, what that must be like.

RODERICK

I wanted to tell someone.

WILLIAM

Have you not told her?

*(pause)*

RODERICK

No.