

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

by Edgar Allan Poe

A One-Act Play

Adaptation by
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The Fall of the House of Usher

by
Steven Schutzman

SCENE ONE

The Benson House, Down Stage Right, signified by a happy, light-filled room with a table, bright flowers and morning coffee service. WILLIAM and SARA are sitting at a table; WILLIAM reading a letter, SARA drinking coffee.

WILLIAM: *(as HE reads)* Strange.

SARA: Yes?

WILLIAM: Passing strange.

SARA: Yes?

WILLIAM: Stranger and stranger still.

SARA: Yes? Yes? What is it?

WILLIAM: It's a letter.

SARA: I know it's a letter, William. Not ten minutes ago on hearing the postman ring the bell; I fetched the morning post and handed it over to you.

WILLIAM: What?

SARA: I said I know it's a letter.

WILLIAM: Never doubted that you did, dear Sister. Never doubted it.

SARA: Oh, and you know, your hair's on fire.

WILLIAM: *(continues reading)* I'll see to it later.

SARA: And what shall we have for supper tonight, freshly snapped twigs and sticks or billiard balls in a light cream sauce?

WILLIAM: Of course, of course.

SARA: And I'm sure you won't mind if I take Captain out for a ride today, jumping over high fences and deep canyons.

WILLIAM: Excuse me?

(SARA gently pulls WILLIAM's hand to the table and the letter with it.)

SARA: What's so strange in that letter?

WILLIAM: The contents, Sara, the contents.

SARA: Now we're getting somewhere.

WILLIAM: What?

SARA: This is a side of you I've not seen before. You're usually on the mark in the morning. Annoyingly so, I say, when one hasn't had her coffee yet.

WILLIAM: I've been up working since dawn, not sleeping until nine, like some people.

SARA: If you would have me beautiful, then you would not begrudge me the sleep that makes me so.

WILLIAM: Laziness always has plenty of time to think of reasons to justify itself.

SARA: I'll ignore that. So, tell me what could that letter possibly contain to throw the mild man of logic and observation so off his game?

WILLIAM: *(standing, resolute)* A desperate summons I must obey forthwith.

SARA: What? Where are you going?

WILLIAM: To start packing.

SARA: *(as SHE stands and sits WILLIAM down)* This is so unlike you. Remember, I'm the one who leaps out wildly while you, dear brother, proceed step by step. Calm yourself.

WILLIAM: Yes, yes. You're right, of course. I must keep my wits about me even as my heart heeds the desperate call in this letter. Does the heart investigate? Does the heart deliberate? Does the heart even look where it's going? No. Like you, the heart leaps out wildly not thinking about the landing. Yet poor Usher seems to have lost trust in his wits.

SARA: Will you please stop being so mysterious and tell me what's going on?

WILLIAM: This letter comes from an old college chum of mine, I may have mentioned him, Roderick Usher.

SARA: Usher. Sounds familiar. Isn't there a mountain named Usher?

WILLIAM: Not that I know of. Roderick Usher and I were boon companions back in college, great chums, though I haven't seen him since and have often wondered how he was faring. He's from a very old family and was quite gifted, musically, artistically. He could do pretty much anything he decided to set his hand to, write beautifully, draw and paint like a master and play, piano of course, but also the violin and guitar.

SARA: Why don't you bring anyone interesting like him home for me to meet?

WILLIAM: Roderick Usher may be a little too interesting even for one as lively as you are, dear sister. You see, he was always a bit sensitive, as people of high imaginations are, but this letter of his certainly tops it all.

SARA: What does? Out with it.

WILLIAM: There are many strange things here. I'll list them for you in the order they struck me as I read. First...

SARA: Now there's the brother I know talking again.

WILLIAM: First, the tone of the letter: It's urgency and wild reasoning. Listen how he writes; "I don't want to alarm you, my friend, though alarm I choose in this report of my condition, and even in calling attention to my sensitivity to alarming you, know how I must alarm you more. Fate is closing in. From outside, from inside, fate has its meeting place, named Roderick Usher."

SARA: Does it make sense?

WILLIAM: But listen to how it goes on: "Sometimes, stretched out on my couch, I become so comatose it seems I am not breathing and that the servant tending the fire has become a vague figure in a fading dream. Yet other times I get so agitated it seems I can't stop wandering without destination the whispering corridors of my house."

SARA: He does write well.

WILLIAM: Second, after writing of the acute bodily illness and mental disorder plaguing him, he names me his only personal friend and possible savior.

SARA: But I thought you haven't seen him since college.

WILLIAM: Yes. That's my point.

SARA: You certainly must not rush off into this. Things started on such a note of desperation never turn out well.

WILLIAM: Usher and I shared many interests in college, and we achieved a balance in being together, my calm reasonableness balancing his wilder temperament.

SARA: You complemented one another.

WILLIAM: And for that I greatly enjoyed his company, while making sure not to be drawn in too far. And he writes that he hopes the cheerfulness of my society will save him from destruction.

SARA: Yes, I certainly see now he doesn't want to alarm you.

WILLIAM: Third, and perhaps most odd of all, Usher has invited me to visit him at his home.

SARA: What is so odd about that?

WILLIAM: You see, back at university, chums were always inviting each other to visit back and forth over vacations. I must have gone to certain friends' homes half a dozen times or had certain others come here. Remember?

SARA: I remember one who would wolf his food down before anyone else had a chance to sit at the table to eat and then would sit there watching us impatiently for the rest of the meal, his stomach gurgling and gugging like a swamp.

WILLIAM: Evan Bradshaw. He's a minister now. The point is...

SARA: A minister. Glug, glug, glug. Ha, ha, ha!

WILLIAM: The point is that over all our college years Usher never once invited any friend to his house. I reasoned it stemmed from an oddity about his family and so I investigated their history.

SARA: Coolly, step by step, that's my brother.

WILLIAM: It's an ancient family as I said, much noted for its artistic sensitivity and charitable works and yet, as honored and well-to-do as the Ushers have been down through the centuries, the family has never put forth any other enduring branch of itself. In other words, the entire line of the family leads to the orphaned Roderick in that single house in the dreary, fog encumbered western hills. He is the only man left.

SARA: Has he married?

WILLIAM: He doesn't say. Yet it seems doubtful that he would reach out to me like this if he were. He mentions no other company, yet I remember him speaking of a sister.

SARA: You mustn't go there.

WILLIAM: A younger sister, I believe.

SARA: Don't go. I fear this is an ill wind. Why not invite the poor man here?

WILLIAM: Listen to what he writes: "This house, this house, I cannot leave, and yet, I must not stay."

SARA: Please don't go, William.

WILLIAM: My friend needs me. I shall be packed and headed west on Captain within the hour. And the mystery we sense here, at the heart of things, is sure to be revealed by this chance of mine to stay in that most singular house.

SARA: Then promise to write to me every day from there.

WILLIAM: I will.

SARA: Promise?

WILLIAM: Yes. I promise.

SARA: If you don't, I'll come after you with both guns blazing. And you must swear too, dear brother of mine, to keep your head about you because it sounds like this Usher is losing his. If you are to stop it, you must not let what's infecting him infect you.

WILLIAM: There's no worry of that, rest assured.

SARA: Swear.

WILLIAM: Swearing is such an extreme thing.

SARA: Swear.

WILLIAM: I swear.

SARA: Then go if you must and take care of yourself. And what will you do?

WILLIAM: Write every day.

SARA: Excellent. Goodbye.

WILLIAM: Goodbye.

(They kiss. WILLIAM rushes off. Lights slowly down on SARA as SHE worries about her brother. End of scene.)

SCENE TWO

(Haunting lute. Outside Usher house of old, gray, fungi-covered stones.)

STONE ONE:

Even as we turn to sand

Tormented stones we yet stand

STONE TWO:

Even as we turn to dust

Hold our house's curse we must

STONE THREE:

Even as we long for sleep

Our family secrets we still keep

STONES ALL: Ohhhh!

(The mournful wailing dies down so the lute is heard again briefly.)

STONE ONE: Will we ever sleep?

STONE TWO: I don't know. What is sleep?

STONE THREE: Perhaps it is the same as death.

STONE ONE: Will we die then?

STONE TWO: I don't know. What is death?

STONE THREE: Perhaps it is the same as dreaming.

STONE ONE: Is this a dream then?

STONE TWO: I don't know. What's a dream?

STONE THREE: Perhaps it is the same as living.

STONE ONE: Are we alive then?

STONE TWO: I don't know. What is life?

STONE THREE: I think we are suspended between.

STONE ONE: Between. Yes.

STONE TWO: Between.

STONE THREE:

Suspended between and suffering.

Tortured minds, aching hearts, restless souls.

Trapped inside these coffins of stone.

Dead yet still alive.

STONE ONE: And though each poor life and stone of Usher.

STONE TWO: Is by itself both ruined and crumbled.

STONE THREE: Still the house stands and we suffer. Ohhh!!!

STONES ALL: Ohhh!!!

STONE THREE: Release us.

STONE ONE: Release us.

STONE TWO: Release us.

STONE THREE: Release us all.

STONES ALL: Ohhhhh!

STONE ONE: Shhh. Someone's coming.

STONE TWO: Perhaps he'll be the one

STONE THREE: To release us all. And finally we can fall.

(The lute and then WILLIAM 's approach on horseback is heard.)

WILLIAM: (*offstage*) There it is, Captain. I believe I'll look the house over from that ridge while you graze yourself in that pleasant meadow here.

(*WILLIAM enters.*)

WILLIAM: Now that's a sudden chill if ever I felt one.

(*WILLIAM tightens his cloak about him, begins to write letter. As HE does, lights go up on SARA at table, reading letter.*)

WILLIAM: "Dear Sara, I had been passing on Captain, 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..."

SARA: (*taking up reading letter*) "...but with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom came over my spirit...I looked up at the scene before me - upon the mere house, and the simple features of the landscape - upon the bleak walls - upon the vacant eye-like windows - upon a few rank bushes and white trunks of decayed trees - with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the smoker of opium - the bitter fall back into every day life - the hideous dropping of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart..." Oh, William, please come home, do come home, that place is surely contagious. If the outside affects you that way how will you survive the walls within...

(*Lights down on SARA and up on WILLIAM as PEASANT approaches carrying a bundle.*)

WILLIAM: (*to himself*) Chill wind, barometer dropping like a stone, perhaps a storm is coming.

PEASANT: (*setting heavy bundle down*) There'll be no storm, Squire. Not here, not today, or any other day.

WILLIAM: Ah but the clouds surely portend...

PEASANT: The clouds are always such over that house.

WILLIAM: Excuse me.

PEASANT: Low and dark, Squire, all the year round. Yet it never rains.

WILLIAM: But that's impossible. Clouds change. It's the nature of clouds to change.

PEASANT: I've only lived round about all my life, Squire Sir. So I repeat to you: The house is suspended in that gloom, every day of the year, bar none.

WILLIAM: And what is your explanation then of the constancy of those clouds?

PEASANT: The explanation down in the village is 'Bottle.'

WILLIAM: 'Bottle?'

PEASANT: The clouds that never rain: Bottle. The water in the lake black as night: Bottle. The weak gray stones decaying like flesh: Bottle. The house of Usher that still stands though each individual stone is crumbled: Bottle. And the family within which it shares its name: Bottle.

WILLIAM: Bottle? What? Meaning what?

PEASANT: There are mysteries that no human can explain or do anything about, so pass the...pass the...

WILLIAM: Bottle.

PEASANT: (*picks up bundle and begins to exit at an odd angle to the house*) Now you've got it, Squire.

WILLIAM: Where are you going with that bundle and why are you walking like that?

PEASANT: I'm going down to the House of Usher to deliver their larder of food - and an especially heavy one it is this week.

WILLIAM: Because they're expecting a house guest.

PEASANT: A house guest?

WILLIAM: Yours truly.

PEASANT: Not on your life.

WILLIAM: Why do you say that?

PEASANT: Bottle, Squire, Bottle. That a sane man would choose so. Goodbye.

(*PEASANT again begins to leave, walking at odd angle as before.*)

WILLIAM: But why are you walking like that?

PEASANT: Oh, I never look directly at the house, Squire.

WILLIAM: Yes, I did notice some vivid force in the view from here that unnerved me and seemed to drag my spirit down.

PEASANT: Aye.

WILLIAM: And I thought that perhaps there are arrangements of natural objects seen from certain angles and perspectives...

PEASANT: Don't know much about angles and such, Squire.

WILLIAM: I only meant that a certain view could have the power of thus affecting us, the decaying walls and trees, the black and lurid lake, the vacant windows, so I thought perhaps if I climbed up a bit for a different view...

PEASANT: Suit yourself, Squire, though from any view it's all the same. A mountain won't stop being a mountain because a man wants to be on the other side of it. So he must climb.

WILLIAM: I only meant the view of the arrangements of things.

PEASANT: Go ahead. View the arrangement from where you like. I won't stop you.

WILLIAM: I shall. I certainly shall.

PEASANT: Excellent, Squire. For what good would it do me to tell a man what I know when he clearly needs to experience it for himself? Me, I never look directly at the house.

WILLIAM: But why?

PEASANT: Bottle, Squire, Bottle. And an excellent good day to you.

(PEASANT exits. WILLIAM pauses then exits. The haunting lute. End of scene.)

SCENE THREE

(WILLIAM enters the house of Usher.)

STONE ONE: His step is too sure and determined.

STONE TWO: And yet look how he slows now, feeling something he cannot name.

STONE ONE: But he's so strong and tall.

STONE TWO: Yet see how he stoops on the way, as if watching out for a low beam or a bat to coming flying at his head.

STONE ONE: His eye seems very sharp and his senses keen.

STONE TWO: As with Roderick, we can turn the sharpness of his senses to our advantage.

STONE ONE: Drip, drip, drip.

(STONE ONE and STONE TWO direct their voices at WILLIAM.)

STONE ONE: Release us.

STONE TWO: Release us.

STONES ALL: Release us all.

STONE ONE: Release us.

STONE TWO: Release us.

STONES ALL: Release us all. And finally we can fall.

(MADELINE enters, sliding along the walls, her fingers moving over the stones like a blind person over Braille, reading them.)

STONE ONE: Wait, wait, here comes that other...

STONE TWO: Who would try to save her brother...

MADELINE: **(to herself as her blind fingers read the stones)** Jonathan Usher, known familiarly as Jack, dead at the age of 29, cause of death extreme exhaustion, one child, Peter Constable Usher, dead at the age of 31, cause of death indeterminate, two children, the twins Rodney and Elizabeth, both dead at 25, cause of death sleeplessness, one child, Gabriel, dead at 36... **(as SHE nears WILLIAM, SHE slows and speaks to him)** Don't listen to them. Don't speak to them.

WILLIAM: I see no one else to speak to here, Mademoiselle. Speak to whom exactly?

MADELINE: My brother must not know. He must not know.

WILLIAM: Know what?

MADELINE: The stones. The stones. He must not know.

WILLIAM: Allow me to introduce myself...

MADELINE: He must never know.

(MADELINE exits. Lights down on WILLIAM, up on SARA reading letter at table.)

SARA: "Dear Sara, There are many things that yours truly, who as you know believes everything can be explained, cannot yet explain. Remember the pervading gloom I spoke of on my first seeing the house of Usher, a gloom I put down to the unfamiliar arrangement of the things in view, well inside everything was most familiar - the carvings on the ceilings, the tapestries on the walls, the blackness of the floors - such things as I have been around my whole life - and yet the fancies which these ordinary images started up in me - made it seem as if the walls surrounding these familiarities were giving off a vibration of cursed gloom, like a soft song or subtle odor that works upon the senses

before one knows what is happening so that on noticing the feeling is already strongly upon you... And then there is Roderick Usher himself, pale as a ghost..."

(WILLIAM enters the drawing room where musical instruments and materials for painting and drawing are spread around. RODERICK, stretched out on the divan, sees WILLIAM. There is though a long, odd pause, as if RODERICK, used to seeing fancies and dreams, doesn't believe in the reality of his visitor.)

WILLIAM: Usher.

RODERICK: William?

WILLIAM: Yes?

RODERICK: William Benson?

WILLIAM: Yes. It's me.

RODERICK: Is it really you there?

WILLIAM: Who else did you invite by my name?

(RODERICK leaps up, rushes toward WILLIAM and embraces him.)

RODERICK: Oh, my good man, you've come at last, at long last. I thought... I feared... You've no idea... since I wrote you I've been doing nothing but wait, wait for your reply, but here you are, you yourself, my great friend and rescuer. My, you're nicely turned out these days, you've turned out nicely. How long has it been? Too long, that's sure. Would you like to play some music or do some sketching or... forgive me for rushing you into things after your long trip? But we are going to have such a fine time together, such a fine time...

(Now strangely RODERICK sinks back upon the divan and doesn't speak.)

WILLIAM: Are you all right? **(pause)** Usher?

RODERICK: Excuse me.

WILLIAM: I just...

RODERICK: Shhhh! Do you hear that?

WILLIAM: What?

RODERICK: Drip, drip, drip.

WILLIAM: No.

RODERICK: Drip, drip, drip. I think its water dripping from the eaves above my sister's window to the leaves below or the secret route water takes among the cracks and fissures of the stones or the dull tapping of endless time underground, a ticking where there is no clock... **(suddenly jumps to his feet)** Pay it no mind. Don't pay it any mind at all. Yes, we shall pay it no mind. In other words, never mind it. Eaves, leaves, window, below. Ha, ha. It's a matter of no importance whatsoever now that you're here. What fun. Yes, yes, you shall have something to eat and drink straight off. Forgive me. Must see to your bodily comfort first, that's the way. I shall ring the bell.

(RODERICK sinks back onto divan, doesn't touch the bell. A pause.)

WILLIAM: Aren't you going to ring?

RODERICK: But I think the sound of the bell would shatter me right now. In a few minutes, we will walk down to the kitchen and you will tell the cook yourself exactly what you want...until then...I'm sorry.

WILLIAM: What's wrong?

RODERICK: Nothing. Now that you're here. I knew that you, if you were the same good soul I remembered, would come immediately on receiving my letter as you most certainly have. Indeed it is why I wrote it and why... **(pause)**

WILLIAM: Your letter was a bit distressing.

RODERICK: See the extra logs on the fire in the fireplace? See all the instruments spread round and the easels and materials for painting and drawing and many of our best-loved books? I remember so fondly the many wonderful and creative times we had together at college and I expect that your visit will be a great relief to me now.

WILLIAM: Relief from what?

RODERICK: My family's curse.

WILLIAM: Excuse me.

RODERICK: My malady, my illness is a family curse; a constitutional evil that runs in the family, or perhaps I should say a string of family curses like a string of pearls upon the neck of a bride of doom...

WILLIAM: You must know; I don't believe in curses.

RODERICK: No?

WILLIAM: But try me, my friend. For it's true that talking about such things often takes away their power.

RODERICK: Oh, sure, I'll talk about them. I don't mind talking about them, talking about them is fine. It's experiencing them which brings on the terror.

WILLIAM: Terror is a very strong word.

RODERICK: And yet we need a much stronger word to capture the experience of it. Yes, the word seems weak in comparison to the thing itself, terror. Very weak indeed.

WILLIAM: Proceed to describe it, my friend, step by step, and together we will find a remedy for the situation.

RODERICK: I knew I could count on you to hope where I have none.

WILLIAM: Proceed at once.

RODERICK: *(raises his hand then lets it drop slowly)* Watch my hand. It's here and then I put it here.

WILLIAM: Yes.

RODERICK: *(as HE repeats gesture)* Here. Then here.

WILLIAM: Yes, yes, I saw.

RODERICK: *(as HE points with his free hand)* But I still see it here where it started and other places in between. Five, six, seven hands.

WILLIAM: After-images is all they are. A trick of the light, no doubt.

RODERICK: No, the family curse. We Ushers are cursed with an infernal acuteness of the senses. Our senses are so sharp as to drive us out of our minds. Sight, as I've just demonstrated. Touch; so that I can only stand to wear the lightest garments against my skin. Smell; so that even the odor of flowers oppresses me. Sound; so that only the soft sounds of string instruments don't inspire me with horror. And taste; so that I can only endure the most insipid, tasteless foods, boiled to within an inch of their lives. But all this is not the worst of it, all these things I can control by what I allow around me. But a strange terror controls me, a terror to which I am chained like a slave...

WILLIAM: Terror at what?

RODERICK: Terror.

WILLIAM: Terror of what in particular?

RODERICK: Terror.

WILLIAM: We can't keep going round like this.

RODERICK: Terror of terror. Fear of fear. Dread of dread. It's the best way to explain why I shall soon perish in this deplorable folly. I don't fear death. Once terror takes hold of me I'd much rather be dead. By terror alone shall I be driven into a hell of suffering and madness. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results: Terror.

WILLIAM: But what is the event?

RODERICK: Unknown as yet, a premonition, coming closer. I shudder at the thought of any event, even the most trivial incident which may cause this intolerable agitation of my soul: Terror.

WILLIAM: But terror of what?

RODERICK: What difference does it make? It's terror. Like waking to find yourself buried alive, your mind running away with itself like a horse running away from the flames on its back.

WILLIAM: It would be a mistake, my dear Roderick, to confuse your brilliant poetic flights for any kind of reality.

RODERICK: Let me try to explain in another way: How do you feel about this house, this most normal appearing of houses?

WILLIAM: Well...

RODERICK: Don't bother to spare my feelings. I already know the answer. This house is a terrible weight on the spirit.

WILLIAM: I repeat Usher: What event are you so afraid of?

RODERICK: I don't know. And that makes it worse.

WILLIAM: You don't know, but how...

RODERICK: I have indeed no dread of danger, except in its absolute effect - in terror. In this unnerved - in this pitiable condition - I feel the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together in some struggle with the grim monster, FEAR.

WILLIAM: A monster of the imagination.

RODERICK: We Ushers have never needed real monsters. For if you are an Usher you are your own monster, you are monstrous to yourself.

WILLIAM: But you still haven't told me what the danger is.

RODERICK: Because I don't know what it is, but I do know this, the affliction occupies this house just as I do...

(MADELINE, spectral and slow, appears in the room, like a sleepwalker, again muttering and running her fingers along the stones of the wall.)

MADELINE: James Usher, nicknamed Jay, dead at the age of 33, cause of death schizophrenia, one child James Jr., dead at the age of 29, cause of death, extreme stress, one child...

RODERICK: Don't go near her. They say it delivers a terrible shock to wake a sleepwalker and my dear sister's health is so very poor it might kill her.

WILLIAM: Are you sure she sleeps?

RODERICK: Yes, she sleeps now. Do not wake her! Let her die so.

WILLIAM: Is she in pain?

RODERICK: Just let her die.

WILLIAM: But...

MADELINE: Please, let me die. (*a fierce whisper so RODERICK doesn't hear*) I must speak to you alone. Alone. Tonight. Tonight.

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