

Despite some distracting technical glitches opening night, flouncy Victorian Lady Enid and leering swineherd Nicodemus absolutely stole the show in “**The Mystery of Irma Vep**” at The Forum Theatre.

We’re not talking about some piddling, scenery-chewing pilfering here and there. We’re talking grand theft hilarious as Lady Enid fretted, twittered and twirled around in her gaudy gowns while Nicodemus winked, drooled and stumped around on his wooden leg after a nasty encounter with werewolves.

The remarkable thing, of course, is that Lady Enid and Nicodemus are two of the wild-card personas created by Monte Wheeler, a longtime Wichita favorite from Music Theatre to Cabaret Oldtown, in this wacky quick-change romp that spoofs Hitchcock, Shakespeare and penny dreadful melodramas and throws in a few vampires, werewolves and mummies for good measure.

Joining Wheeler – or, rather, trying to keep up with him – is Ray Wills, who also plays multiple parts in this two-person spoof from playwright Charles Ludlam. Wills is Lord Edgar, a stuffy Egyptologist whose first wife, the titular **Irma Vep** (anagram for vampire), died under mysterious circumstances, as well as moody, broody, bluenose housekeeper Jane, who idolized **the** dearly departed mistress.

To be sure, Wills, a Wichita native who has returned for a sabbatical after a successful career on Broadway, is a thoroughly adept performer (he was understudy for Tony-winning Nathan Lane in “**The Producers**”). But **the** nature of his roles makes him **the** straight man (and woman) to Wheeler. His Lord Edgar is classic British twit, but his Jane is straight out of “**Monty Python**” with a nod to Jon Stewart’s twittering take on Queen Elizabeth II.

But Wheeler, a fearless and shameless ham (meant in **the** best possible way), pulls out all **the** stops, playing Lady Enid like Bette Davis might have – looking painted and pained like Baby Jane and stalking imperiously about like Eve Harrington: Bumpy night, indeed.

There are eight or so characters in **the** show – including an ancient Egyptian princess who is stacked like a brick, well, pyramid – all played by Wheeler and Wills with **the** considerable backstage help of their dressers, Frank Keith and Dona Lancaster. Most changes take place within seconds as one of **the** actors goes out one door as one character and comes back in another as a different one. **The** pinnacle is Wheeler playing a scene with himself as both Lady Enid and Nicodemus. You have to see it to believe it.

Directing this delightful madness is Rick Bumgardner, who worked more than two decades in Kansas City’s theater scene before returning home to Wichita this year. Bumgardner keeps **the** pace brisk and **the** shtick surprising – and occasionally outrageous as **the** princess uses her body as a road map to point out historical spots like Giza and Aswan. Bumgardner also throws in random pop references from “**Gone With the Wind**” to “**Gangnam Style**,” for a quick extra giggle.

The only problems opening night came from slow light and sound cues and a door that apparently slipped its latch and, distractingly, kept swinging wide open, exposing backstage secrets. All are easy fixes. **The** sound effects and recorded music cues should be turned up a bit so they don’t seem so timid, like an afterthought.

The gothic mansion set by Tyler Lessin is beautifully detailed and sturdy, although a large and wonderful chandelier seems underplayed peeking out from behind a red curtain. **The** costumes by Jeffrey Meek are sumptuously over **the** top, particularly Lady Enid’s gowns that look inspired by Scarlett O’Hara’s green velvet drapes dress complete with fringe and tassels. In this case, too much is just right.