

*“La Chute de la maison Usher”: Poe performed in Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg)*

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**This review has been published in The Edgar Allan Poe Review, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 99-100**

“As the shades of the evening drew on,” nightfall on 30 November 2012 ushered in a single performance, at the Municipal Theatre in Esch-sur-Alzette, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg’s second city, of “La Chute de la maison Usher,” a multimedia stage adaptation of “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The event graced the theatre’s boards thanks to a visiting company, the Nouveau Théâtre from Besançon in France, the French-language script being by Sylvain Maurice, adapted from the Baudelaire translation, and the music by Alban Darche.

This is Poe modernised, with no hint in the stark, minimalist decor of any of the original’s Gothic architectural trappings. Yet it remains paradoxically faithful to Poe, reproducing all but word-for-word large portions of the original Poe-Baudelaire text, through the voice of the tale’s narrator turned main actor – including “difficult” passages like the mirror-image tarn sequence at the beginning, or the list of Usher’s esoteric books (replicated to the letter). The spectacle lasts exactly one hour with no interval - in perfect fidelity to Poe’s notion, as expounded in his theory of the short story, of the brief narrative as an aesthetic experience occupying precisely such a time without external distraction.

It also brings to the fore, within that same modern-yet-loyal dynamic, the perhaps latent but extremely powerful multimedia dimension of Poe’s text. As readers of “Usher” know, the tale’s middle section centres on the narrator’s account of how he and Roderick pursue the arts together, through painting, reading, the writing of poetry, and musical composition and performance. “La Chute de la maison Usher” concretises this multimedia element by introducing both music and on-screen visual imagery. There is a missed opportunity when the narrator faithfully describes Usher’s abstract “vault” canvas, but no illuminating image appears on screen. By contrast, however, and arch-significantly, “The Haunted Palace,” the *mise en abyme* poem which Usher composes and sets to music, accompanying himself on the guitar, appears as a set-piece, performed in French and transposed into a modern arrangement.

The music is contemporary throughout, piano- and saxophone-based in an idiom somewhere between jazz and modern classical, with female vocals ascending to peaks of Mahler- or Schoenberg-like anguish. The visual imagery, too, is entirely modern, with rapid fadings and mergings. In a further distancing effect, Roderick Usher is played by a woman, while Madeline does not appear directly at all until after her death.

The story’s climax as embodied in this interpretation rises to ever-intenser heights, verging, quite as much as does the original, on the psychotic. When the narrator flees the collapsing house, no blood-red moon is seen, but the screen throws up the disturbing images of the dark waters of the tarn as they close in on the fissured mansion. Had his phantom been watching, surely Edgar Allan Poe would have approved so moving a retreading and updating of his classic exploration of the confines of mind and art. The Besançon company is to be congratulated on a theatrical achievement which, be it hoped, will if it travels further succeed in attaining the wider audience it eminently merits, in Poe circles and beyond.

See:

[www.esch.lu/culture/Documents/Programme%20Theatre-Conservatoire%202012-2013.pdf](http://www.esch.lu/culture/Documents/Programme%20Theatre-Conservatoire%202012-2013.pdf)

[www.theatredelacommune.com/cdn/saison-2010-2011/la-chute-de-la-maison-usher](http://www.theatredelacommune.com/cdn/saison-2010-2011/la-chute-de-la-maison-usher)

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