

# The Long (and Short) of Costume Design

Tony-winning costumer William Ivey Long on stripes, sequins, and going over the top for The Mystery of Irma Vep.

By Gerard Raymond



“Lingerie is a favorite thing of mine, but I would never stand there and say that,” giggles costume designer William Ivey Long. Still, it’s really not a secret. Just check out Long’s Tony-nominated work currently on Broadway: the dancebelts, garters, and tights in *Chicago*; the ratty fishnets and torn undies in *Cabaret*. For his latest project, however — a spiffy revival of the late Charles Ludlam’s zany classic, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, now at the Westside Arts Theatre — Long has created elaborate 19th-century gowns, instead of designing clothes to show flesh.

*The Mystery of Irma Vep*, which was premiered by Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company in 1984, is a riotous Gothic concoction of vampires, werewolves, haunted moors, and Egyptian mummies that plunders cheerfully from a variety of literary and cinematic sources, including Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* and the B-horror movie *The Wolfman*. But Long says his contribution to the show wasn’t a parody. “I’m making beautiful 1890s dresses out of absolutely the most beautiful fabrics on earth. I can’t stress enough that we are not — N-O-T — doing a camp show.”

Surrounded by a stack of letters and faxes and three busy assistants in the basement studio of his

Chelsea brownstone, Long is in the middle of a flurry of activity. He has just returned from supervising the costumes for the Vienna opening of *Chicago*, and he's about to attend a meeting for a forthcoming Broadway project — the revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*. "It's going to be a budget fight," he confides glumly. But he seems happy enough to take a break to chat about *Irma Vep*.

"You want to re-envision it totally, but you also respect it," he says, describing his approach to revivals — from the 1992 *Guys and Dolls* to the current Kander & Ebb hits. In the case of *Irma Vep*, he's also anxious not to lose the "wry, sophisticated, madcap quality" that epitomized Ludlam's work. The new production is directed by Ludlam's lover and longtime collaborator Everett Quinton, who also co-starred with the author in the original production. (The play calls for two actors to impersonate eight roles among them; this time around, Quinton is playing the parts which Ludlam created, with Stephen DeRosa as co-star.)

If you think Quinton's presence in this production may be daunting for Long, consider also that the current star designed the costumes for the original production, as well — and received the coveted Maharam Award for his work. "Boy, was I stepping into dangerous undercurrents here," Long says with a chuckle. But Quinton's intimate knowledge of the show was vital, because *Irma Vep* requires its two actors to pull off a series of split-second changes, and the costumes must function as technical devices much like props or scenery. "Everything has to fit in and be timed exactly," says Long as he produces a set of charts on which the show's intricate costume plot has been mapped out with the help of a computer.

Mechanical necessities aside, the costumes for *Irma Vep* are actually a meeting of two very whimsical minds.

Before going to the drawing board, Long sat, Post-It pad in hand, with Quinton and pored over books about the 1890s. Every time Everett said, "Ohh, I love that," Long marked the page with a yellow sticker. "I sat listening to him and watching his body language. He was a kind of Geiger counter," Long relates. "Everett's tastes are very eccentric, which is perfect for this show."

a pink striped fabric. "I had the perfect stripes — my curtain fabric!"

Long's Scarlett O'Hara act is very much in keeping with the spirit of the Ridiculous, but he explains that it was partly necessitated by the limited costume budget for this production. In fact, he's dipped into his private stock to come up with some of his most stunning creations for *Irma Vep*. "Here is one of my great fabrics," he says, holding up a swatch. "There's a poor chair weeping somewhere, waiting to be upholstered in that fabric, but now Lord Edgar is going to be upholstered in it!"

A native of Manteo, North Carolina, Long arrived in New York in 1975, fresh out of Yale School of Drama. He and his classmates would shortly become the vanguard of an exciting new breed of off-Broadway artists — playwrights Christopher Durang, Albert Innaurato, Ted Tally, and Wendy Wasserstein; actors Sigourney Weaver and Meryl Streep, to name a few — but Long says he spent two years (his "breakdown years") trying to figure out a career for himself. Although he had designed costumes for several shows at Yale — memorably dressing Durang as an altar boy and Streep as Miss

Havisham in Durang and Innaurato's zany spoof *The Idiots Karamazov* — he had studied set design at school. "It's very humbling when you come to the biggest city where theater is done and all the slots are filled," he says. So he moved into the Hotel Chelsea in hopes of inveigling his way into the presence of the famous couturier Charles James, who was residing there at the time. It took six months to become James' apprentice — actually, he spent the evenings doing odd-jobs like taking out the garbage and walking the couturier's dog — but in the next two and half years, he learned his craft. "I knew I wanted another teacher, and Charles James was a genius."



**Stephen DeRosa and Everett Quinton wear William Ivey Long's designs in *The Mystery of Irma Vep*. (Opposite: Long's sketches for these costumes.)**

Long brings out his *Irma Vep* sketches and starts to explain which character is wearing what, but then stops and exclaims, "Oh, I forgot to show you!" He asks his assistant Gregory for the November 1995 issue of *Architectural Digest*. "You'll laugh when you see this," he promises, adding, "Everett loves stripes — the biggest Geiger counter readings were [over] pictures with stripes. So I really wanted a dress to have big, old stripes." He turns to page 141 of the interior design magazine, a special issue entitled "Broadway at Home," and points to a photo of the living room in his Massachusetts country home. The picture window is draped dramatically in



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By this time, many from Long's Yale crowd had found a home at Playwrights Horizons; Long designed Durang's first hit, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You* there in 1981. He had also started working at other off-Broadway institutions like the Public Theater, where he costumed the original production of *True*

*West* with Tommy Lee Jones and Peter Boyle. ("I was there in the room when Joe Papp and Sam Shepard had their yelling, screaming match," Long recalls. "Passions were high!")

His big break — and first Tony, Drama Desk, and Maharam Awards — came with Tommy Tune's 1982 production of *Nine* on Broadway. "It was one of those lucky things," Long says modestly. "Willa Kim and Ann Roth had both turned it down because they were busy." For *Nine* — a musical about a philandering filmmaker by Maury Yeston, Arthur Kopit, and Mario Fratti, based on the screenplay of Fellini's *8 1/2* — Long created a series of dramatic black-and-white costumes for the nearly all-female ensemble, causing a mini-scandal with his suggestive jumpsuit for the late Anita Morris. The black net costume designed



A sequins-and-feathers extravaganza: *Crazy for You*.

for Morris' show-stopping number "A Call From the Vatican" was deemed too revealing for television and was censored from that year's Tony Award telecast. "That was a hard birth," recalls Long, who says the actress had originally demanded a long-sleeve turtleneck and trousers because she was double-jointed and wanted the extension. "She was nervous about showing her skin, so we went through about three different designs before we came up with the outfit — which, if you think about it, *was* a long-sleeve turtleneck top with trousers, but different. I protected the skin by covering it with net and ruffles!"

Describing the moment of a costume's creation, Long says, "It's the magic of the fitting room — you have the mirror, and you pin and you pin." He laughs, remembering how he start-



Pinstripes on parade: *Guys and Dolls*.

ed work on Morris' body stocking by taking great pains to make sure the "curlicules were curliculing strategically." But the actress told him not to waste too much time on it. "I knew what she was up to; she was just into wildness!" he chuckles. "She had the option of wearing something underneath, but she chose not to. I don't think you could see anything at all really, but it was the audience awareness that there was nothing underneath." Exclaims Long, "It's fun to shock, because what you're doing is letting people in on a new discovery and they react to it in different ways. Sometimes I get shocked. I look at some of the things we did in *Cabaret* and go, 'I can't believe we did this!'"

Despite the attention some of his costumes have received — apart from the revealing ones, he fears he may never live down the pink sequins he lavished on *Crazy for You* — Long has steadfastly maintained that costume design is best when it is invisible. "Yes, I do believe that still," he says. "I learned that at Yale Drama School, which is totally devoted to text and performance, and we 'support teams' are there to serve the play. I know this sounds like I'm talking out of one side of my mouth, because *Crazy for You* was so in-your-face, but I'm tickled to death that my last two Tony nominations [*Chicago* and *Cabaret*] have been for minimalist work." He adds that even though he put Miss Adelaide in a chicken outfit in *Guys and Dolls*, he generally heeds director Jerry Zaks' advice for costume design: "Don't make funny costumes, make appropriate costumes. The humor is in the language, the direction, and the performance."

But, to get back to *Irma Vep*, minimalism was not going to wash with Quinton. "I did my whole spiel to Everett, which I believe to the bottom of my soul," Long reports. But Quinton replied, "What do you mean? Absolutely, the costume *must* wear the actor. When I come out in my dress, they must all go *ahhhh* and applaud!" ■

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