

THE  
*gallery*  
PLAYERS  
present

# KISS

# OF THE SPIDER WOMAN



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STUDIO  
THEATRE  
ipswich

## Helen Clarke, Director

Helen was a founder member of The Gallery Players back in 1985, and is a member of Gallery's Steering Group.

She both designed and performed in many early Gallery shows - including *A Little Night Music* (Countess Charlotte Malcolm), *Into the Woods* (Little Red Riding Hood), *Cabaret* (Sally Bowles) and *Chicago* (Roxie Hart) – before moving into directing. Her productions include both plays (*A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *Bully Boy*) and musicals (*The Baker's Wife*, *A Man of No Importance*, *Urinetown*).

Helen writes:

Directing *Kiss of the Spider Woman* has been a complete pleasure from the very first talks and read-throughs to production week. I was delighted to have the chance to work with Dean and Ben again. We really bonded as a team on *Bully Boy* during the Gallery Studio Theatre's opening season in 2021, and it was great to be able to build on such firm foundations with the challenges *Spider Woman* threw at us. It is equally a thrill to work with people for the first time, and Richard and Elley have both contributed vital input to the project.

I have been privileged to have an extraordinarily talented creative team who have brought to life the cramped confines of Cell 7 – Dave and James with lighting, sound and scenery, Robb with costume and Paul, who conjured onscreen magic.

Likewise Anthony and Rachel, who have quietly and efficiently ensured the smooth running of the production.

It has been an absolute joy to work on this iconic play, and uncover so many exciting layers and possibilities within it. It surely has been the gift that keeps on giving. Every rehearsal has brought new discoveries and revealed new insights into these two unforgettable characters.

Every one of you will take away something different from the piece. For me, this theory of Suzanne Jill Levine, Puig's close friend and author of his biography, lingers: that Molina and Valentin “represent two sides of Manuel”. She quotes Puig himself: “For me homosexuality doesn't exist. Heterosexuality doesn't either. I don't think there's a difference between men and women except for what they have between their legs. The distinction between masculinity and femininity, the whole notion of role-playing, isn't natural. When people ask me, “Are you gay?” I say, “I'm a person.”

The *Spider Woman* has well and truly trapped us all in her web!



## Manuel Puig – an escapist in exile.

Manuel Puig, who wanted to be a screenwriter and only turned to writing novels after his 30th birthday, all but grew up in a movie theatre.

He was born in the small town of General Villegas, in the Argentinian Pampas, in 1932. He was introduced to movies at a young age by his mother, Malé. They watched B films almost daily. “It was our escape,” Puig told *Américas* magazine in 1986. “I hated my town. There was an authoritarian, repressive atmosphere, and I saw everything in terms of a second-rate cowboy picture, a B Western. The townspeople were the villains, not the heroes.”

Staring at the screen, he fell in love with the female stars of the thirties: Rita Hayworth, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Greta Garbo, and others. In his essay “Cinema and the Novel,” Puig wrote that the films of the thirties and forties had such lasting power because they “really were dreams displayed in images. . . .”

There was a reason why Manuel didn't feel comfortable in his Catholic, conservative neighbourhood. By the age of three, he was already dressing up in his mother's nightgown and high heels, attempting to emulate female stars from the silver screen. This continued throughout his childhood, despite his father's violent blows and verbal abuse, including the threat of beating him to death.

After a coup d'état in Argentina led to a full-blown military dictatorship, Puig felt increasingly unsafe, and in 1973 he left, living in Mexico for two years. In 1976 he wrote *Kiss of the Spider Woman* while living in exile in Greenwich Village. It was immediately censored in Argentina, and would remain so until the return of democracy in 1983. Puig resigned himself to permanent exile.

In 1990, he died from a heart attack in Mexico at the age of 57.

Melanie Sheridan for the Melbourne Theatre Society, November 2019, wrote: “It's not entirely clear whether, were the book written today, Molina would even be described as a man. He often identifies as a woman throughout *Kiss of the Spider Woman* and at one point says, “As for my friends and myself, we're a hundred percent female. . . . We're normal women; we sleep with men.”

Food for thought...



## Kiss of the Spider Woman – The Metamorphosis of an Escapist Conversation

Argentinian writer Manuel Puig, wrote *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (*El beso de la mujer araña* in Spanish) in 1976, while he was in exile in Greenwich Village, New York.

Composed almost entirely in dialogue and stream of consciousness, with copious footnotes, it tells the story of two cellmates in an Argentine prison, Luis Molina and Valentin Arregui, Originally released to critical dismissal— the *New York Times* called it “a rather frail little love story”—the book made Puig a celebrity in the gay enclave of New York City, but not much else. His home country was in turmoil at the time. In 1976, the Argentine military overthrew the government of Isabel Perón. The junta started a Dirty War against Argentina's citizens, whisking away anyone it suspected of being leftist, and incarcerating, torturing and murdering them. The estimated 30,000 people who were kidnapped and killed came to be known as “the missing,” or *desaparecidos*.”

Against this background, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* was included on a list of banned novels in Buenos Aires - Puig feared it could adversely affect his family. It remained banned until 1983 when the military junta gave up power.

Puig himself adapted *Kiss of the Spider Woman* for the stage, transforming his novel into a theatrical play in 1983; it was then translated into English by Allan Baker to premiere in 1985 at London's Bush Theatre, with Simon Callow and Mark Rylance as Molina and Valentin respectively.

Following the successful staging of the *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* play, in 1985 the story was turned into an independent film starring Raul Julia, William Hurt and Sônia Braga, directed by Argentine-Brazilian filmmaker Héctor Babenco from a screenplay by Leonard Schrader.

The film broke boundaries for Hollywood. Hurt was first actor to win an Best Actor Oscar for playing an openly gay character and *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* was the first independent film to have been nominated for the Best Picture Academy Award.

*Kiss of the Spiderwoman* completed its metamorphosis in 1993 with its transformation into a critically acclaimed Broadway musical, with music by John Kander, lyrics by Fred Ebb, (creators of such all-time classics as *Cabaret* and *Chicago*), and a book by Terrence McNally. Starring Chita Rivera, Brent Carver, and Anthony Crivello, the musical would go on to be nominated for 11 Tony Awards, winning seven, including Best Musical, Best Actress for Rivera, and Best Actor for Carver.

Puig disliked the film. Yet for all his frustration with the adaptations of his novel, they guaranteed its longevity. *Kiss of the Spider Woman* is the only book of Puig's in English that remains steadily in print. The *Spider Woman* still casts her spell over us all!



# Cast

## Dean Wales – Molina

Dean did not hesitate in accepting the rare opportunity to perform in this remarkable play, with the chance to work once again with Helen and Ben as well as working alongside for the first time with Richard being the final clincher. Dean has performed in everything from small workshop plays right up to large-scale musicals and pantomimes for over 30 years, compereing, producing and scriptwriting along the way. He has always admired *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* as a theatrical piece and is enthralled to be able to create the role of Molina for a Gallery Studio audience.



## Ben Maytham – Valentin

Ben is no stranger to theatre. Since graduating from Drama School he has appeared in productions throughout Essex, Suffolk and London. Aside from acting, Ben has turned his hand to writing and directing. His full length play *Eaglehawk Ridge* will be staged next year with Awen Productions, and he will direct in the LGBTQ History Month next February. Ben was previously in the Gallery Players production of *Bully Boy* and is very excited to be back with Dean and Helen, playing such an interesting, thought provoking role in a play that's not widely shown, yet incredibly powerful.



## Richard Spencer - Warden

Richard was Head of Drama at a local comprehensive school for 25 years. He now dabbles in mostly satirical poetry while simultaneously playing 5 or 7-a-side football, sometimes on the same team as the legendary Freddie Alcock, with whom he now works one-to-one as a Personal Assistant. Both of them appeared in Gallery's recent award-winning production of *Macbeth* (2021). Richard has always had a strange fascination for prisons but has never, until now, been in or worked in one.



## Ellena Woolf – Irina

Ellena studied drama at college but stepped away from theatre whilst she worked out her identity. Following her gender transition, she performs as a poet and works as a community artist, developing art projects that uplift and empower the queer community. Ellena was thrilled to make her debut with the Gallery Players and to unleash her inner femme fatale for *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.







The film crew:  
For *Feline Fatale*:  
Film maker - Paul McGhie  
Styling - Robb Gilbert  
Hair - Charlotte Rose Sampson  
Gofer - Andrew Clarke

For the *Spider Woman*:  
Film maker - Paul McGhie  
Styling - Leeann Ling



photos: matt meyrick

**Setting: A cell in the Villa Devoto Prison, Buenos Aires, Argentina.**

**Time: 1975**



Robb Gilbert's  
Costume designs



### **Creative team:**

**Director:-** Helen Clarke

**Set Design and Realisation:-** Dave Borthwick

**Lighting and Sound Design:-** James Aleksic (JLA Sound and Light)

**Costumes:-** Robb Gilbert

**Stage Manager and Props:-** Anthony Malster

**Lighting and Sound Operator:-** Rachel Doy

**Poster and location photography:-** Mike Kwasniak

**Poster design:-** Wade Ablitt

**Rehearsal photography:-** Matt Meyrick

**Publicity:-** Helen Clarke, Wade Ablitt, Andrew Clarke

& members of the cast

**Programme:-** Steve Taplin

**Set construction:-** Dave Borthwick, Norman Rutterford, Jenni Horn,

Matt Meyrick, Helen Clarke

The *Spider Woman's* film maker **Paul McGhie** is an award-winning director, screenwriter and producer.

His short film '*All Piñatas Go To Heaven*' was selected for the London Short Film Festival and won the best film at the Lift Off Film Festival.

His debut feature '*Webcast*' won the grand prize at the Unnamed Footage Festival and is available on Amazon Prime.

"I was really excited to be a part of this *Kiss of the Spider Woman* project. It's not every day you get to re-create such a wonderful style and genre from the history of cinema."

Paul also runs *Hand Held Videos*; a production company for creative and commercial projects. Paul also runs several workshops designed to improve video marketing skills of businesses and his clients have included Coca-Cola, Sky Sports, and the BBC.



### **Acknowledgements:**

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East Anglian Daily Times

Georgy Jamieson @ Suffolk Theatre





## Cat People – the film within the play.

When you talk about horror films from the Golden Age of Hollywood you tend to refer to the great Universal classics from the 1930s – Dracula, Frankenstein and The Wolf Man.

After that, film fans invariably leap straight to the 1950s with movies like Creature From The Black Lagoon, Invasion of the Body Snatchers, Godzilla and The Day The Earth Stood Still.

Horror movies from the 1940s are often overlooked and critically underappreciated. When the concept of 'film horror' gained traction in the 1940s, it had a much more wide-ranging definition than it does now—it embraced mystery, psychological drama, 'paranoid woman' films, Sherlock Holmes whodunits, and what is now known as 'film noir'.

Back then, 'horror' signalled internal disorientation as much as it did external threats, and even external atmospheric conditions such as fog or dark shadows pointed back to this inner malaise.

Cat People is a legendary movie—a sleeper hit of 1942 and an instant cult item.

Irena Dubrovna, a Serbian artist in exile (Simone Simon) believes herself doomed by an ancestral Balkan curse to metamorphose into a panther if aroused by passion, and thus obliged to withhold herself from the man she loves – a “good plain Americano.”

The film's producer, Val Lewton, a RKO Pictures staffer, hired director Jaques Tourneur. Low on resources, the two created a new kind of horror language and raised the creature feature to new heights of sophistication. Cat People is a film driven purely by shadow and suggestion. It's a were-cat film with no lurid transformation scene. The monster lives almost entirely outside of the frame, where our own imaginations can colour it in to be as blood curdling and gruesome as we desire. The famous sequences – the unseen Irena, transformed by jealous rage, stalking a rival in Central Park, and again in the basement swimming pool of an apartment building – are filmed through the marks left behind: a bush rustling, paw prints trailing off into heel marks, a bathrobe clawed to shreds.

Cat People is sympathetic to its monster. Irena is a woman torn between contradictions: she's expected to play the virginal bride but fears her violent desires will destroy the man she loves. American society demands that she integrate, though she's unable (and unwilling) to cut ties with her homeland and its traditions.

It was followed by a sequel, The Curse of the Cat People, in 1944.

A much more explicit version of Cat People was reimagined in 1982 starring Nastassja Kinski and Malcolm McDowell, with a theme song by David Bowie. The story was surprisingly faithful to the 1942 film but the off-screen sexual tension and cat transformations were now in plain sight. ***Sometimes the human imagination can be the most convincing special effect of all.***





**Gallery Players** started back in 1985. *Pat Taplin* decided, with a group of friends, that in order to get the kind of *Theatre* they wanted to see performed locally, they'd have to do it themselves. Mounting lesser known, rarely produced plays and musicals has always been our forte and we'd like to think we've been doing it rather well for close to 40 years!

Although this direction brings many freedoms, to uncover hidden and forgotten gems of theatre that other groups wouldn't tackle, it can also be financially challenging for us, as we inevitably take more box office risks.

In 2021 we took another 'leap', moving into our very own premises, **The Gallery Studio Theatre**. A dream for a decade had been realised.

The opportunities the **Studio** gives us are immense, no rushed get-ins a couple of days before opening night, the ability to rehearse and build a show in the same space it will be performed in - all huge positives.

The 'flip' side, of course, will be paying a 'commercial' rent and all the associated costs that go with running and maintaining the building.

Since 2019 **Gallery Players** has been a *Charity* and every penny we make goes back into the shows and the upkeep and improvement of **The Studio**.

**So, we're asking for a little help from you, our dear friends and supporters.**  
**We don't just want to 'get by with a little help ....' as the Beatles sang, we want to Thrive and Flourish!**

We were hoping you'd consider making a manageable monthly donation?  
Perhaps **£2.50, £5 or £10**, nothing silly (unless you wanted to!) which over a year would build to be incredibly useful to us and most welcome. Furthermore, if you are a tax payer this amount could grow 25% at no cost to you through *Gift Aid*.

More details of the scheme are on our website ([www.galleryplayers.co.uk](http://www.galleryplayers.co.uk)) along with a link to join it. There's also leaflets in the Studio foyer .

*Our current friends are:-*

**Hattie Bennett, Di Borthwick, Sarah Caddick, Lisa Cheadle, Theo Clarke & Sonia Duncan,  
Chris Dunnett, Stuart Hume, Teresa & Paul Jennings and Brian Theodore Ralph**  
*What a lovely bunch you are!*

*Thank-you all for supporting our shows and perhaps you to will consider becoming a  
'Gallery Friend' too?*

**getting by with a little help from our friends.....**

**[www.galleryplayers.co.uk](http://www.galleryplayers.co.uk) for more info.**

Gallery Players (CIO). Charity number:- 1186641

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'I regret .. nothing!'

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Piaf deals with adult themes and contains some strong language

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