

What Do We Do With Miss Lydia?

by David Umbach

Miss Lydia is gone. The question is: What do we do with her? She would not want to be locked in a casket and covered with dirt. Nor would she like being reduced to ashes and contained in an urn. So, what do we do with her?

What she would really want is to remain in her home, her incredible house, with the fifty years of antique accumulation. That huge, Victorian house, which is more like a museum than a home, but a warm, cozy, museum with antique furniture, knickknacks and *object d'art* covering every square inch of wall space, floor space and table space, in all thirty rooms. Rooms that bombard the eyes with myriads of colors, textures, and shapes, taking one back in a confusing time machine, to no particular era, but to many places in history at once.

Each room in the house is a fantasy world of its own. The dining room is full of American primitive furniture, pottery, and utensils. But, for counterpoint, accompanying this Early Americana one finds a wooden, carousel horse, a huge doll's house and the make-up mirror said to have belonged to Sarah Bernhardt. But Miss Lydia never spent much time here; formal dinners were not her style.

Upon entering her cramped kitchen, anyone could guess that Miss Lydia was not into the art of cooking, because it would be next to impossible to cook an elaborate meal there. The ancient sink and stove are the vintage of the house. The walls and ceiling are covered in iron and wooden kitchen utensils, but none of them are for use. There is no counter space to work on, because every available area is taken up with nostalgic photographs in elaborate picture frames. Amidst all the delightful clutter, which includes a grinning, wooden Indian, there is barely enough room to turn around. However, sitting at the round, kitchen table, under the hanging Tiffany glass lamp, was the primary social spot in the house, where instant coffee or iced tea and cookies were served to all welcome visitors. Maybe this is where we should put Miss Lydia.

On the other hand, the Victorian parlor was used for more formal visits. It has special charm, with its fringed shawls draped around the windows and over the tables. The room was crammed with furniture,

like huge armoires and those ghastly, uncomfortable Victorian couches. There's a shoe-shiners bench, in the center of the room, covered with dolls and on the walls are dozens of paintings, mostly glowering portraits. And of course, there are knick-knacks everywhere, some of which Miss Lydia changed with the season.

Many a guest has sat with a glass of sherry, upright on one of those beastly couches, gazing in awe at an end table, crowded with a fringed Victorian lamp, five porcelain "pickaninnies", an art deco vase, a crystal ball in a bronze mount, a small Greek statue and hand painted lace fan. Yes, if we want the formal feel, perhaps this is the place for Miss Lydia.

But in which room did Miss Lydia spend most of her time? That's simple, in the elaborately decorated, mistress' bedroom, snuggled in her huge carved oak, four-poster bed, surrounded by some of her most precious belongings all carefully strewn about the room -- the large Victorian doll sitting on a rocking chair, the circus animals parading on the walls, the hundreds of antique dolls and toys filling every corner of the room. In the center of this bed, with her Scotty dog, Angus, Miss Lydia would lie, reading the latest "hahrah" novel by Stephen King, or studying her lines for a play she was rehearsing; antiques were not her only passion.

Miss Lydia was an actress, on and off the stage. Her voice, a cross between Katherine Hepburn and Tallulah Bankhead's, has been used to thrill theatergoers with the words of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and the like, for six decades. With her beautiful, blond hair (the dark roots never showing) piled high upon her head, she has become Blanch, Linda Loman, Eleanore of Aquitaine, and Amanda (Winfield and Prynne), capturing their essences with theatrical aplomb.

She could also hold center stage in her living room, regaling anyone within earshot with hilarious tales from her Appalachian childhood, her many affairs, or her dealings with disasters on the stage.

She was radiantly happy either on stage before an admiring audience or all alone surrounded by her beloved antiques. And happiest of all, entertaining guests amongst her treasures. So, the question remains, what are we going to do with Lydia, now?

It was a small group, for a Friday, just a family from Iowa with

two young children, a Japanese man with a Nikon, and an old lady from the Wednesday Morning Club right in town. The curator asked them many questions, typed the pertinent information into the computer, collected their \$5.00 admission fee, and told them to wait in the Art Deco vestibule. The man with the Nikon immediately began to snap photos of the two matching plaster statues of Oriental children, nicknamed “The 'tards”, and the blue, Deco fan mirror over the fireplace. The youngest child started to touch the mannequin that was dress like a flapper, but his mother stopped him with a sharp “Now, Daryll”. The little girl started to giggle and pointed at the replica of the Brussels "Pissing Boy" statue on the stairs. “Hush, honey”, said the father.

The curator, a handsome young man who was working his way through college, came into the small room just as the Japanese man started to stray into the parlor. “Sir, could you please stay with the group, the tour is about to begin.” He then reached around behind a potted palm and pushed the “play” button on a tape recorder and a voice interrupted the embarrassed silence.

“Hi, folks, I'm so glad you could come and visit me in my home, today.” It was a voice that was both dramatic and welcoming; a deep, husky sound that the computer recreated, almost perfectly, of Lydia's voice. The old woman gave a gasp, “Oh dear, that sounds just like her”. The mother whispered, “Did you really know her?” “Oh, I didn't know her, well,” answered the old woman, proudly, “but I saw her perform many times on the stage and visited this house once, while she was alive.”

The voice didn't wait for their conversation. *“I hope that you enjoy my little house, and all my precious things. I would like to ask you to be dears, and not to touch anything, some of these things are very, very old and we want them to last a long, long time more.”*

The little boy put his hands in his pockets and stared at the potted palm in awe.

The voice continued, *“In a minute I'm going to ask you to step into my parlor, where I often served tea. But before we leave my little hall, I want you to know about that crystal ball over in the corner “.* Everyone turned, in unison, to face the other side of the room and gazed at the huge, silver-mirrored ball sitting on a bronze deco pedestal. *“I used this ball when I was the fortune teller in 'The Skin of Our Teeth", and*

one night the ball spoke to me and told me to get home quickly after the play. Well, do you know, my dears, when I got home, I surprised a burglar, ransacking my lovely house, and he was so shaken up, he dropped everything and ran. He didn't get one single, precious thing. “

There was a collective gasp from the group and the Japanese man snapped several shots of the mystical ball, along with the little boy who had put his ear right next to it, trying to hear the ball talk. The mother said, “Daryll, don't get so close to that thing.”

“Now if you would all move to your right through the arch and into my parlor. Look all you want, my dears, but, please, don't touch.”

The group moved tentatively into the huge parlor, gazing in all directions at the myriads of objects that caught their eyes. There was a path cleared through the middle of the room, with silk ropes keeping everyone on it and a plastic cover over the Oriental rugs. The little girl squealed, “Oh, look, Mommy, see those cute, little black babies!”, leaning over the ropes and pointing at an end table. The mother said, “Yes, Hannah, but don't push on the ropes.” Then to her husband she said, “How did she keep this place dusted? Do you think she had a maid?”

“Is that real, Dad”, said Daryll, pointing to stuffed gorilla in the corner behind some ferns. “I should hope not, son,” said the father, “it has a clock in it's stomach.” “Gross!” said the boy.

No one noticed as the college boy started the tape recorder on the tall mahogany secretary, so that when the voice began, they all were taken by surprise. It seemed that Lydia's simulated voice was coming from the large portrait of a scowling Victorian woman, on the wall, though this was not the intention. *“Well, folks, how do you like my little parlor? There are 536 of my favorite belongings in this room, but can you guess which is my most favorite of all?”* “Everyone looked around and muttered their guesses. *“I'm sure some of you chose the bronze statue of Mercury holding the rose vase, and you would be very close, indeed. But my true favorites are those porcelain “pickaninnies” on the table next to the green sofa.”*

“What's a ‘pickyninny’, Mommy?” asked Hannah. “Why, those little, black babies you were showing me before, dear, but that’s not a polite thing to call them,” answered the mother in a whisper. “They're my favorites, too, lady”, the girl shouted, in the direction of the portrait of Sarah Grimes, and everyone chuckled.

The old woman was staring at an intricately carved, wooden chair, with jungle birds and animals entwined around the back and arms. She said to no one in particular, "My goodness, that can't be very comfortable to sit in." "It is very beautiful, though." said the Japanese man, who snapped another photo.

"I love having you all admiring my darling things, but there's much more to see, so perhaps it's time to move into the dining room, where I'll show you the make-up mirror that belonged to Sarah Bernhardt." So, in this manner the tour group moved from room to room, being guided by the voice coming out of various tape recorders. They circled around the rough-hewn pioneer table, then went one by one through the tiny pantry and into the kitchen. The boy was particularly excited by the wooden Indian but was reprimanded by his father when he tried to grab the tomahawk. The Japanese man set his watch to the Seth Thomas wall regulator, after Miss Lydia's voice told him that it kept perfect time, never losing a minute. The old woman confided in the mother that she had sat at this table, once many years ago, and Miss Lydia had served her iced tea.

From there they went up the back, service stairs to the second floor. Most of the objects that used to crowd the stairs were removed, but the walls remained covered with pictures and clocks and fans and flowers all the way up the stairs and flowing into the hallway. On the second floor the tour group remained in the hallway peering into the various bedrooms, a plastic barrier stopping them from entering. Her mother had to drag little Hannah away from the "Doll and Toy Bedroom," but the girl begged the curator to let her go all the way in the room to play with the dolls. He quietly, but firmly, refused.

After everyone seemed to be satisfied with what they saw in the hall and bedrooms, the college boy spoke up to get their attention. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we come to the highlight of our tour. If you will form a line in front of that closed door, I will lead you into Miss Lydia's mistress' bedroom. Please form a semi-circle around the big bed and be ready for a delightful surprise."

The mother gathered up her children and the Japanese man rushed to the front of the line, camera poised. The old woman held back a bit, at the end, slightly uneasy about what was about to happen. The curator then unlocked the door with a big skeleton key, and ceremoniously, swung it open. He then led the group around the bed and quickly sat

down behind a tiny desk in the corner, hidden by some chintz curtains. He began punching things into the computer.

No one paid the slightest bit of attention to the curator, their eyes were riveted to the bed where Lydia sat, leaning against a dozen flowered pillows, and smiling at everyone as they entered. She was wearing a dragon kimono and her glorious hair was piled up onto her head, shining like gold in the theatrical lighting that was hidden in the four-poster bed.

“Welcome, welcome, my dears, to my private boudoir, I'm so glad you could come and visit me. I do hope you enjoyed the rest of the house.” Her head moved as she spoke, nodding slightly, and her jaw opened and closed, coordinated with the words she spoke. Her arm made a sweeping gesture when she mentions the rest of the house, and then returned to the comforter again. She looked uncannily real, but slightly surreal at the same time.

The group didn't say a word, the Nikon didn't click, everyone just stared at her as she went on talking. Only the old woman had made an audible gasp when Lydia started talking.

“Now let's see, who has come to visit me today? Oh, this delightful family must be ...The Cartwrights...and I understand that you came all the way from ...Des Moines, Iowa...what a charming family you are! This dear little girl is ...Hannah...aren't you adorable! And this sweet little boy must be... Daryl... Did you know, honey, that the Indian you admired in the kitchen was made by a Sioux warrior?” Daryll held his father's hand tightly and said nothing.

Miss Lydia chuckled and said, *“Didn't you just love the Doll bedroom... Hannah...? It's my favorite bedroom, except for this one, of course.”* The little girl clung to her mother's skirt, but she spoke up with a quaking voice, “Yes, ma'am. And I wonder, could I go in and play with the dolls?” Lydia gave a hollow chuckle, as the curator typed furiously on the computer. *“Oh, I'm afraid I can't let children in that room, as much as I'd like to, honey, you see we believe that the ghost of a my great aunt Esther lives in there and I wouldn't want to disturb her. But you may look in again before you leave.”*

Miss Lydia's head jerked toward the Japanese man. *“And who is this handsome gentleman from the Orient?”* His eyes opened even wider, but before he could force himself to speak, Lydia went on. *“I believe that you are ...Mr. Yakemoto... is that right? And that you come*

from Osaka in far off Japan.”

“This is true,” said Mr. Yakemoto, but could not find words to say anything else.

“I have never visited your glorious country, but you may have noticed that my collection has several objects d'art from there, which I cherish. Did you see the ceremonial seppuku sword in the hall, outside my room? I believe it is from the 16th century.”

The Japanese man felt flattered by the compliments to his country, and said, “Yes, it is very beautiful, -- like yourself, beautiful lady.”

The group murmured in agreement, and Miss Lydia said, “*How gallant of you, kind sir, I do enjoy a compliment, even at my age.*”

The old woman giggled nervously and seemed about to flee when Lydia's head turned toward her. “*And ...Abigale Winter..., how lovely of you to stop by to chat again. I so enjoyed our last little visit. Did you notice any new objects since the last time you were here?*”

Mrs. Winter gave a little squeak as she tried to answer. She felt a combination of embarrassment, fear, and pride that she had been remembered. “No, Miss Lydia,” she managed to say, “everything seems to be just as you left it”.

“But my dear, I haven't left it at all, as you can plainly see; I'm still right here where I belong.