

Warren Gerds/Critic at Large: Review: 'A Murder is Announced' keeps 'em guessing in Fish Creek

by: Warren Gerds

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FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV)

News flash: All the red herrings have gone missing from the sea. They are scattered about a labyrinth of plotting inspired by Agatha Christie.

Each cause for suspicion can be found in the play "A Murder is Announced" that has started a three-week run at Peninsula Players Theatre.

As the audience left on opening night Wednesday, wrong guesses were left behind, stacked to the ceiling. Cleanup at Letitia Blacklock's Victorian home in Chipping Cleghorn – don't you just love the British names? – began immediately.



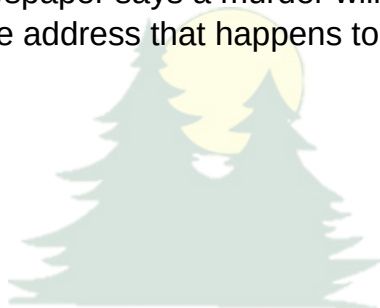
Ashley Lanyon, Carmen Roman, Cassandra Bissell, Neil Brookshire, Christie Corran, Penny Slusher as Miss Marple, Lee Palmer, Cindy Gold, Alexis J Rolston and Will Skrip. Photos by Len Villano

The home is quite the deal. Spacious. Spiffy. Finest furnishings all around. Walls covered in upper-crust portraiture. A full-length portrait of a nobleman to the audience's right looks suspiciously like the play's director, Joe Foust, but I could be wrong. All the finery looks like it needs the care of a housemaid, and there is one. Agatha Christie always made sure her upper crusties were taken care of – and also so she could have one more suspect.

Along with her excitable maid, Letitia Blacklock has in her presence a chum from way back who is akin to a stray pooch that's not right in the head and two younger folks she treats as shirttail relatives; they bicker like brother-sister. The persons in this group – as most everyone in the play – dress like they've just raided the best clothing shoppe (this is Britain) in towne (of a way back, say the '20s), and then hit the shoe shoppe for the best. As scenes progress, part of what transpires is a fashion show.

The story? I'm getting to that, as Agatha Christie does in her way. Here is the meat of it, in two bursts.

One: A classified ad in the local newspaper says a murder will take place at 6:30 p.m. that day, which happens to be Friday the 13th, at the address that happens to be Letitia Blacklock's home.



Two, and trying not to give too much away: At the appointed moment, with guests added to increase the pool of suspects, the lights go dark, and there is much clamoring before and after three gunshots are fired.

The overall body count in this Agatha Christie creation is low – it's not "And Then There Were None" – but the list of suspects, as usual, is up to the eyeballs.

Now, what goes on in the play doesn't always happen on stage... and people's lives are detailed from complex and sometimes suspect biographies of unseen relatives, acquaintances and superiors/inferiors from their dusty, cloudy past.

The need to pay attention is insistent, though relieved by the knowledge that everything will be sorted out in the end. Inspector Craddock will get the culprit, with great assistance of Miss Marple, swooping in at just the right moment.

Playwright Leslie Darbon brings an Agatha Christie novel to the flesh-and-blood of the stage – a mean task because novels are wordy, you know – with the Peninsula Players cast fleshing out bundles of character quirks.



Carmen Roman and Penny Slusher as Miss Marple.



Neil Brookshire, Lee Palmer and Penny Slusher.

Penny Slusher portrays Miss Marple (in somewhat dumpy, well-worn wear) in a kindly manner. Miss Marple drifts in and out, mostly at the fringe of something important and ready to point the inspector in the right direction.

Interestingly, Miss Marple is almost a side character. Carmen Roman has much more stage time – and complexities – as Letitia Blacklock. Carmen Roman is a collage of colorful acting, with Letitia Blacklock being a profuse palette.

This being a professional cast, the players know their way around all the nice furnishings and maze of a plot, assisted by seasoned director Joe Foust. Each is good in his or her way. Notables are Cindy Gold as the soft-in-the-head chum, Lee Palmer as the efficient and direct inspector, Ashley Lanyon and Will Skrip as the bickersome duo, Alexis J. Roston and Neil Brookshire as a lofty, queenly mum and her smarmy son and Cassandra Bissell as another murky shirttail relative.

Lighting up the action is Christie Coran as Mitzi, the Hungarian maid whose every sentence is comical, what with all the arm waving and dramatic pronouncements about her escapes from dire consequences – unlike her family members who were executed or sent to Siberia.



Christie Coran

Final thought: Like Agatha Christie? She's here.

Creative: Playwright – Leslie Darbon, adapting from the Agatha Christie novel; director – Joe Foust; scenic design – Jack Magaw; costume designer – Keith Pitts; lighting designer – Guy Rhodes; sound designer – Christopher Kriz; properties – Wendy A. Huber; dialect coach – Greg Vinkler; scenic artist – April Beiswenger; stage manager – Richelle Harrington Calin; production manager – Cody Westgaard; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey

Cast:

Julia Simmons – Ashley Lanyon
Letitia Blacklock – Carmen Roman
Dora Bunner – Cindy Gold
Patrick Simmons – Will Skrip
Mitzi – Christie Coran
Miss Marple – Penny Slusher
Phillipa Simmons – Cassandra Bissell
Mrs. Swettenham – Alexis J. Roston
Edmund Swettenham – Neil Brookshire
Rudi Scherz – Joe Foust
Inspector Craddock – Lee Palmer
Sergeant Mellors – Joe Foust

Running time: Two hours, 15 minutes

Remaining performances: To July 28: 8 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 7:30 p.m. Sundays, except 4 p.m. July 28

Info: peninsulaplayers.com

RELATED EVENTS: Post-show discussion July 17 with actors, designers and the director.
Pre-show discussion July 26 with Christopher Chan, Ph.D., speaking on Agatha Christie and the creation of Miss Marple; info: peninsulaplayers.com.