

Theater Review: Christie mystery maps the misreading of women in 'The Hollow'

Mike Fischer, Special to the Journal Sentinel 6:26 a.m. CDT July 20, 2016



(Photo: Len Villano)

Fish Creek – When a man is sleeping with three women at the same time, he's asking for trouble – particularly if his philandering unfolds in an Agatha Christie play.

Sure enough: We haven't even reached intermission before Doctor John Cristow (Steve Koehler) gets his comeuppance in Christie's 'The Hollow,' being staged by Peninsula Players Theatre under Joe Foust's direction. But while the good doctor's untimely end may be a foregone conclusion, who killed him and why won't become clear until the end of this play.

There are suspects aplenty.

Gerda (Maggie Carney), his long-suffering wife. Henrietta (Erica Elam), a sculptor and Cristow's current mistress. Veronica (Katherine Keberlein), who left him years ago for the movies and now wants him back. Edward (Matt Holzfeind), smitten with Henrietta and jealous of the doctor. Hostess Lady Lucy Angkatell (Penny Slusher), who wants Edward and Henrietta to marry.

Even the officious, somewhat creepy butler (Mark Moede) has his reasons: Cristow is a brash outsider, in a world where nearly everyone is related to or works for an old, aristocratic family whose ancestral seat – Ainswick – is prominently featured above the mantel at The Hollow, the house in which the play unfolds.

That name aptly embodies what's happened to the fading splendor of the richly appointed world – so reminiscent of Downton Abbey – represented by a place like Ainswick. 'At Ainswick, you see, time stands still,' Edward says, dreamily. But he's wrong, as driven home by the disconnect between that hollowed-out illusion and this play's bleak, post-World War II English reality.

While 'The Hollow' opens with a soothing interwar image of the comfortably ensconced Sir Henry (Tom Mula) reading the newspaper, the sun has already set on the British Empire: Henry has retired from his colonial position in the Raj because British India is itself no more.

Meanwhile, the disgruntled butler complains that the Labor Party now runs and is ruining the country. Poorer members of this aristocratic family – including Midge (Katherine Duffy) – must work for a living.

When once settled rules and roles erode, everyone becomes an isolated and unknown stranger, prone to interpretive blunders because the old social clues no longer resonate. And that's when Christie always shines – leading her characters and us through a map of misreadings about whodunit, which ultimately tell us more about ourselves and our assumptions than the crime.

Before Christie's story truly takes hold – deftly spinning us and these characters into the weft of her intricately plotted design – there's a fair amount of exposition to wade through; as is always true with Christie, we willingly give ourselves over, knowing there'll be machinations aplenty to come.

The Peninsula cast helps the medicine go down; while they're all playing types, they do so credibly and, in a few cases, exceptionally.

I was particularly taken with the quartet of Carney, Duffy, Elam and Slusher; each one presents a woman who is much more than all the ways she's been pigeonholed: Carney's Gerda as stupid, Duffy's Midge as childish, Elam's Henrietta as a female body; and Slusher as insane.

Taken together, those traits sum up the ways men frequently read women; it's therefore all the more delicious that the man who gets plugged here is a doctor: someone who

ought to see more, thinks he sees everything and actually sees nothing. In this play – in every Christie play – he has plenty of company.

IF YOU GO

'The Hollow' continues through July 24 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. For tickets and directions, visit www.peninsulaplayers.com/ Read more about this production at TapMilwaukee.com.

TAKEAWAYS

The Snows of Yesteryear: 'Why should things come into your mind?,' Cristow asks Henrietta. 'Things that are over and done with?' It's a question many characters ask themselves in this play, as they struggle to accommodate themselves to a present that they can't quite connect to the past. As suggested above, a failure to reconcile past and present – and an accompanying willingness to bathe the past in a false nostalgic glow – is one of the chief reasons that characters in 'The Hollow' are out of touch with both themselves and their surroundings.

The Mystery of Christie: As I've said previously in writing on the Milwaukee Repertory Theater's 2015 production of Christie's ['The Mousetrap.'](#) we're apt to engage in a similar misreading of Christie, whose old-fashioned settings and typed characters can give her stories a paint-by-numbers quality. Done well, however, a Christie play doesn't just serve up a well-constructed plot. It also provides a trenchant commentary on the anomie of modern life, especially as experienced in Britain after World War II. As Christie's characters themselves learn within the worlds she creates for them, there's often much more going on than what one sees.

Period Eye Candy: There's plenty to see in this production, thanks to scenic designer Sarah E. Ross' handsome proscenium set, a garden room described by Christie in the script as an 'informal room, but furnished with taste.' That's what we're given here, providing a fitting backdrop for designer Rachel Lambert's period costumes. It's more than enough to lull one into a false sense of comfort and security, further underscoring the contrast between the casual elegance of this setting and the murder that unfolds within its confines.

What Does Lucy See? Comic relief throughout 'The Hollow' comes our way courtesy of Lucy, who seems daft from the very first time we meet her – talking to herself as much as anyone, often in non sequiturs. When the inspector (James Leaming) investigating the doctor's murder asks to question her, her response says it all: 'I shall do everything I can

to help you. As long as you don't ask me what time anything was, or where I was, or what I was doing. Because that's something I never remember.'

For all that, Slusher give us a Lady Lucy who can sometimes seem like the sharpest knife in the drawer – consistent, as suggested above, with the way many women in this play see farther than one might initially think. Lady Lucy's sometime disconnect from the comfy, clubby world she inhabits might actually be a confirmation of her mental well-being; it keeps her quirkily alert to things others miss, anesthetized as they can be by their inability to see beyond their immediate surroundings.

Performing Lives: One gets a sense that Lucy sees more than she lets on late in the first scene, when she responds to Veronica's brief appearance at The Hollow with the droll but biting comment: 'What a beautiful performance!'

One wonders how much more Lucy discerns of the gap separating the various performances she (and we) watch and who these characters truly are; one also wonders who, beneath the persona she projects, Lucy herself truly is. Christie's script invites such questions; Slusher's acting, which conveys more than initially meets the eye, drives those questions home, in a play where nothing and no one are ever quite who or what we think they are.