

Sound 'n' Stage: Acting is fine, Christie not so much in Players' 'Nile'

By Marty Lash 11:46 AM, Aug 22, 2012 *Door County Advocate*

According to the Guinness Book of World Records, Agatha Christie is the best-selling novelist of all time. The famed mystery writer created memorable sleuths such as Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot who remain very popular.

Peninsula Players is presenting Christie's "Murder On The Nile," which was adapted from her novel "Death on the Nile." Christie rewrote it and changed the name for its stage production. Curiously, Poirot solved the crime in the original version but was dropped in favor of a minister, Canon Ambrose Pennefather, who tries to identify the murderer in the stage version.

The story takes place on a luxury cruise liner in 1947. It's one of those high-end cruises where many of its inhabitants seem to have money to burn. As the action takes place the boat is on the Nile River in Egypt.

There are Christie's usual brand of characters which include a number of eccentrics. Among them are a handsome but penniless Simon, who is on his honeymoon with a wealthy socialite, Kay. Simon broke off his engagement to another woman, Jacqueline, who was once Kay's best friend. It turns out that Jacqueline seems to be following the couple everywhere and turns up on the ship. Coincidentally, Pennefather also happens to be Kay's guardian.

When Kay turns up murdered, the prime suspect becomes Jacqueline, but things get complicated when it is revealed she has an alibi.

With it appearing that Jacqueline may not be the prime suspect, the other characters and their connections to Kay eventually come into focus. Through a series of circumstances and unexpected events, we eventually find out who the murderer is. Pennefather, who was expecting to just relax on the cruise, works to unravel the mystery.

The other potential suspects on the ship include Miss ffoliot-ffoulkes, a rich, old woman, and her niece Christina. There is also an outspoken man named Smith and Dr. Bessner, a German who seems to object to the manner which Kay's family amassed their wealth. These characters and others are revealed as they wander in and out and tell us about themselves.

I have to admit that I find Christie an acquired taste. Her plays can be entertaining, but having seen many of them I find that they are all, more or less, weaving the same kind of plot device. Christie's so-called surprises are really not that very surprising, and I also have trouble with how one-dimensional all her characters are.

In this play Christie's choices of characters and their relationships to each other are curious. It seems somewhat ridiculous that someone's ex-fiancé would take a cruise with her former intended.

Also, I wonder why Christie dropped Poirot, who is a strong, charismatic character and brings some life to her plays. Her minister has much less presence and is not as interesting as Poirot.

I can say that, in typical Players manner, the show is well-acted and has very fine, creative staging. Included in the big cast is Ericka Mac, who was spectacular in "Chicago." Here she plays the doomed Kay. Brandon Dahlquist, making his Players debut, has a nice turn as Simon. The always enjoyable Carmen Roman is superb as the self-centered and domineering ffoliot-ffoulkes. (Where did Christie come up with a name as weird as that?) I also liked Karen Janes Woditsch, who plays the scorned Jacqueline with venom and manic energy. You do come to believe she is a woman who has come unhinged.

So, if you are a Christie or murder mystery fan, there will be much to enjoy. For myself, I find this and many of her shows to be thematically repetitive and not that memorable.

Sorry, Players. Overall the season has been exceptional and I will never forget "Chicago." This one, though, did not grab me.

"Murder On The Nile" by Agatha Christie runs through Sept. 2 at Peninsula Players Theatre, 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. Curtain times are at 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays and 7:30 p.m. Sundays, except for 4 p.m. Sept. 2. Individual ticket prices are \$33 to \$39. For tickets or more information, call (920) 868-3287 or visit www.peninsulaplayers.com.

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