

Interactive Murder Mystery Offers Lowbrow Fun

Written by Jill Walsh

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In the course of 20 minutes, more than 150 audience members met a principal with a fetish for riding crops and black leather, a “chalk-dust”-using English teacher, and a Latin instructor with bad hygiene. Then the secretary was murdered and dinner was casually served. So begins It’s a Mystery’s latest murder-mystery/dinner-theatre performance *Teach Me to Murder* at the Abbey Station.

In 1996, Scott Naumann came up with the idea for It’s a Mystery over pizza with his wife. “We thought it’d be cool to have a whodunit kind of show at a place like Jumer’s or the Abbey Hotel,” he said. “It was actually coincidence that got our company started, though. Crow Valley Country Club called me to help them schedule a show for a party, and I ended up getting some friends from the Genesis Guild to take part in an unscripted mystery. The audience loved it, so a year later, the group started writing scripts for murder mysteries and performing them around the Quad Cities.”

He said the core of actors who started It’s a Mystery is the reason for its increasing popularity. Six years ago, the small cast of Naumann, his wife, Earl Strupp, and Pat and Patti Flaherty performed only at small parties, and now, they’ve expanded to sell-out crowds of almost 200 people.

“It’s great to have such a group of performers with talent and stage experience outside our company,” Naumann said. “I’m lucky to still have the actors I began with, in addition to others who are flexible in changing roles.”

Rehearsals are held in Naumann’s living room two or three times before each performance. The actors have about a month to familiarize themselves with their roles and to acquire accents, if needed. Because many of the characters in It’s a Mystery plays are “stock” (they are stereotypes of some kind), performers need to have versatility when it comes to accents, dialects, and costume selection. (Each actor provides the character’s wardrobe.)

The three-and-a-half-hour performance begins with Scene I, the introduction of the characters in “play” form and the discovery of the murder. Audiences receive study clues and biographies

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of the characters during dinner, when they also have a chance to begin interrogating cast members. The second scene further sets up certain characters who might be involved with the murder, but after the performers are done, it's up to the audience to solve the crime on the specially provided "solution" forms. After dessert, Scene III reveals the murderer, and the actors are formally introduced as the director reads some of the more humorous solution guesses.

And the performance isn't the only perk of the evening. Caesar salad, chicken, veggies, potatoes, and chocolate-chip cheesecake provided by the staff of the Abbey Station make the lofty admission price more understandable. Cocktails are also available before the show and during intermissions.

Because the show is interactive, cast members are scattered among dinner guests throughout the performance. During intermissions, the characters mingle with audience members, tell jokes, and try to convince guests they are not murderers. Even when questioned and harassed by audience participants, the actors never break character, and they ad-lib when necessary. The constant effort the actors are putting forth should be appreciated, especially considering the short time they have to memorize, rehearse, and perform – not to mention the fact they aren't exactly receiving millions for each show. Dedication, humor, and love for acting are the driving forces behind the success of *Teach Me to Murder*. Director Scott Naumann, Earl Strupp, Matt Walsh, Patti Flaherty, Craig Michaels, Margo McInnis, and Barb Engstrom remain upbeat, funny, and convincing throughout.

The humor is lowbrow, but not in bad taste; there were a handful of sexual references, bathroom humor, and jokes about audience members' clothing (all in good fun, of course). One woman wearing leather pants was immediately characterized as a "wild woman into S&M." Kids probably wouldn't understand what's going on, although two youngsters got a kick out of giving high fives to the cast members.

Advice, though, if you don't want to be the center of attention: Make sure your haircut does not resemble Elvis', and don't wear a blue-velour jumpsuit or anything that will stand out in a crowd. Most importantly: Come prepared to have a good time and to participate. The show won't work unless audience members are willing to interact with the cast and contribute to the solving of the murder.

Naumann agrees audience members are just as important as the actors. "Though Patti and I write all the scripts, it takes at least two or three performances before we can call a play a 'final draft,'" he said. "So much depends on the reactions of the audience; they give us indirect feedback on what we should keep and what we should get rid of."

In the classy settings of the Abbey Station, *Teach Me to Murder* is fun, humorous, and performance-driven – but intended for people willing to get involved, be briefly ridiculed, and have a good time.

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Tickets for Teach Me to Murder are \$35 and are available through the Abbey Hotel, (563)355-0291, for June 8 (at the hotel) and June 21 (at Abbey Station). Doors open at 6 p.m. and shows begin at 6:30.