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If you haven't yet attended a production of the show, Agatha Christie's murder mystery *The Mousetrap* - which has been running in London's West End for more than 56 years now - is definitely worth a look-see. Boasting ripe British caricatures and the author's signature brand of mordant wit, this clever, funny play is one of Christie's most enjoyably constructed contraptions.

If, however, you *have* seen *The Mousetrap* before, you'll still find plenty to enjoy in the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's current presentation of the piece ... even if the *most* enjoyable aspects of director Tristan Layne Tapscott's production are ones I can't get into here (at least not without plastering SPOILER ALERT at the top of every paragraph).

Based on the crowd's collective reaction to Saturday's performance, this *Mousetrap* is doing its job and then some. The plotting kept our audience continually and even *audibly* engaged (during the blackout that followed one character's introduction, a woman behind me muttered, "He was acting *mighty* suspicious"), there were laughs in all the right places (plus a few wrong ones), and the climactic revelation was met with nervous laughter *and* gasps. But as someone who's known whodunit and who-*gets*

-it in Christie's comic thriller for more than 25 years, I had great fun at Playcrafters' season-opener just by noticing which actors were giving away telling details through their readings and body language, and which were - intentionally or not - sending the audience down the wrong path. (Whether or not you've seen the play before, *The Mousetrap* should make for excellent conversation during the drive home.)

Christie's mystery takes place in the Great Hall of the newly opened British country inn Monkswell Manor, and the production's pleasures begin before a word is even uttered, because the scenic and lighting design is, from the start, legitimately Great. Tapscott's and Kelly Lohrenz's set, which beautifully utilizes the Barn Theatre's thrust stage, is a warmly inviting, terrifically detailed playing area, and Jennifer Kingry delivers a lighting effect so simple yet so ingenious that I can't *believe* I've never seen one like it before - a series of downwardly cascading white lights, viewed through the set's rear windows, that provide the illusion of falling snow. (Like the production's climax, this delightfully *faux* blizzard also received a deserved laugh-and-gasp.)

We're quickly introduced to the manor's co-owners, Giles and Mollie Ralston (Adam Overberg and Denise Yoder), and then the guests start rolling in: the flamboyant, conveniently named architect Christopher Wren (Mike Kelly); the aggrieved, unsmiling matron Mrs. Boyle (Dee Canfield); the courteous, inscrutable Major Metcalf (Don Hazen); the sardonic, sexless Miss Casewell (Alexa Florence); and the eccentric, heavily accented surprise visitor Mr. Paravicini (Spiro Bruskas). Not long after their arrivals, Detective Sergeant Trotter (Adam Michael Lewis) shows up, bringing news that the killer of a London woman may well be one of the inn's patrons (or proprietors), and may be planning a second murder under the Monkswell roof. But who's the killer? And who's the intended victim? And why does everyone appear to blanch when Trotter reveals the true identity of the deceased Londoner?

It's a supremely engaging, juicy tale, and Tapscott does a fine job of staging moments that make audience members nudge one another with "did-you-see-*that*?" awareness; a scene of Casewell quietly exiting the room without Mollie's knowledge is handled with particular subtlety and smoothness. He's also adept at pacing the exposition so you never get lost amidst Christie's byzantine plotting, although I do wish Tapscott had taken more care with a few performers: Hazen seems unsure of what to bring to his role beyond vague geniality; Overberg, despite some expert dry-comic deliveries, is often so reticent that he seems on the verge of vanishing completely; and Kelly's Wren has been designed as such a distractingly fey, mincing queen - continually shooting a sideways grin and naughtily raised eyebrow toward the audience - that he's less a character type than a
commentary
on a character type. This Wren is just a mauve wig away from a full-blown Dame Edna, and while Kelly's broad antics do make many in the audience laugh, I'm not sure that's necessarily a

good
thing.

Yet while the actors frequently appear left to their own devices, there are, at least, a bunch of terrific devices on display. Florence and Bruskas come through with smart, playful performances, the deep-voiced Canfield is riotously imperious (her gesture when silently ordering Giles to remove her coat is sublimely, hysterically understated), and Yoder gives a sensationally well-thought-out, emotionally complex portrayal of a flummoxed young woman trying, occasionally in vain, to keep her head above water. Best of all, perhaps, is Lewis' Trotter, so frumpy and twitchy and endearing - especially when reacting, with deadpan incredulity, to his suspects' stonewalling - that you'd gladly watch him every week in his own *Monk*-esque TV series. Playcrafters'
The Mousetrap
, in truth, is like the
ideal
TV murder mystery: lighthearted, droll, and, for some of us, thoroughly engaging even as a rerun.

For more information, call (309)762-0330 or visit Playcrafters.com .