

## Killing Time: "Any Number Can Die," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through May 16

Written by Thom White  
Monday, 10 May 2010 06:00

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As I watched Friday's performance of *Any Number Can Die* at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre, I tried to remember that there was (probably) a time when Fred Carmichael's script was considered hilarious. As a spoof of murder mysteries of the 1920s, this 1965 work may originally have been fresh, poking fun at the plays that audiences were used to seeing. Now, though, with so many comedies poking fun at murder-mystery clichés - and with one seemingly presented each year by Playcrafters - the jokes at the expense of the clichés have themselves become cliché. Still, Carmichael's script and Playcrafters' production of it are amusing enough to make the show at least tolerable.

The play involves 10 people who've arrived at an island mansion for the reading of its deceased owner's will. Some of those present stand to inherit a fortune. Others are there to investigate potential crimes. The rest arrive under false pretenses, to either protect potential heirs or get the fortune for themselves. And over the course of one night, they all will endure or encounter a lightning storm, a midnight reading of the will, secret passageways, a creepy house staff, and a hooting owl. (I'm sure, though, that I missed a spoof-y cliché or two. Or four.)



If there's anything especially impressive about Playcrafters' production, it's the sound effects. I don't recall a moment during the play in which there *weren't* any. Created by sound designer Mark McGinn, there are constantly fluctuating sounds of rain and occasional thunderclaps - combined with impressive lightning effects by designer John Weigandt - plus an owl that hoots in response to about half of the lines in the play. (With so many sound cues to follow, sound

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operator Jean Lupoli deserves a mention for not missing a beat on opening night.)

And the set is almost as impressive, as designer Bill Marsoun - who also directed the production - has created a mansion that feels grand and overwhelming, complete with cobwebs, a flickering chandelier, a grand staircase, and hidden passageways.

Marsoun's cast, however, is a bit inconsistent. Mike Schmidt is *overly* over-the-top as Hannibal, an older private investigator on his first case. Schmidt's hammy performance does add punch to some punchlines, but is often just too exaggerated - as, too, is Diane Greenwood's enunciation. Her line deliveries worked quite well for her when playing a pretentious actress in Playcrafters' *Moon Over Buffalo*

, but here, as heiress Celia, it's a distraction. Greenwood has a gift for interpreting comedic characters, but her over-pronunciation here all-too-often overwhelms her performance.



On the opposite end of the spectrum is Bill Bates, who is almost too reticent as Celia's husband, T.J. (Although he may simply be too reticent in comparison to Greenwood, as he's not bad.) Dan Ade adequately portrays newspaper reporter Jack; he doesn't deliver much nuance, but he's likable. It's Don Hazen's performance as Roger, the reader of the will, that's *refreshingly* underplayed. Hazen simply brings himself to the character, offering an unforced, laid-back naturalism - a low-key approach that wouldn't work in every role, but *has*

worked, so far, in those in which I've seen him cast. Stephanie Moeller's young heiress, Sally, is also nice enough, and her performance is certainly more limited by her character than her talent, which was much better showcased in the Prenzie Players' *Trojan Women*

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Neither too hot, nor too cold, but just right, is Spiro Bruskas, whose butler Edgar is perfectly creepy. Lisa Kahn matches him well with her (mostly) consistent accent as Zenia, a Haitian gypsy of a housemaid; Kahn adds just enough authenticity to her tarot-card-reading mystic to come across as realistic rather than corny. Bryan Woods creates a delightfully snobbish, likably unlikable Carter. And Barbara King, in her Playcrafters debut, is arguably the most intriguing of them all. Her detective Ernestine is somewhat of a mystery herself, letting you know from the start that there's definitely more to know about her.

If I were to sum up *Any Number Can Die* in just two words, they would be "amusing enough." The play's hilarity may have faded over the years, but Playcrafters is able to bring out just enough of its chuckles to keep it from being boringly bad.

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*For tickets and information, call (309)764-0330 or visit [Playcrafters.com](http://Playcrafters.com) .*

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