

Written by Thom White
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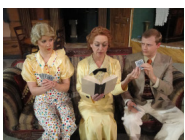


It doesn't feature a question mark, but the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's *Whodunit... the Musical* may still not have the right question in its title; after viewing Saturday's performance, I was instead asking myself, "What

is it?" The show's book, for the most part, is a straightforward murder-mystery, the majority of its songs make for a bright and cheery musical, and the climax and dénouement are straight out of drawing-room farce. It's an identity crisis bigger than the mystery afoot in the show's plot.

Set in the summer of 1931, creator Ed Dixon's *Whodunit* takes place in the mansion of its deceased owner. Carrie Innis (Carrie SaLoutos) rents the home for a week, bringing along maid Liddy (Autumn O'Ryan), niece Sally (Elizabeth Miller), and Sally's friend, Jack (Tristan Layne Tapscott). Just before Carrie's arrival, the house staff quits out of fear of strange things happening, leaving only the butler, Thomas (Frank McClain), to tend to the guests. And two dead bodies later, we discover that

ryone has reason to have "dunit," including a local police officer, Mr. Jarvis (Tom Walljasper).



The most stunning aspect of director Dennis Hitchcock's production is, no question, its set.

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Designer Susan D. Holgersson has created an impressively elaborate, two-story drawing room boasting a gorgeous staircase - featuring a wood banister and decorative wrought iron - railings, crown molding, and floor-to-ceiling beams set against dark green walls. It's truly, and probably expensively, grand. (I'm ready to move in as soon as the show's run ends.) And equally impressive are designer David Makuch's lighting effects; there are, of course, the requisite flashes of lightning - which are some of the most realistic I've yet seen on a local stage - but when lightning *isn't* striking, Makuch's designs cast ominous shadows on the set, adding to it even more texture.

Yet these effects are more ominous than the show itself, which would better dramatize its plot if it weren't interrupted by songs. I like the show's book, which is captivating and offers the right amount of humor. However, just when the production's tempo gets going, Dixon includes a line obviously meant as a setup to a song, there's a pause for the musical intro, and an actor (or group of actors) sings a tune that's much cheerier than the dialogue was, halting the pacing in its tracks. In truth, this isn't *always* the case; "Strange Things Going On" has the tone of a dark mystery (and is reminiscent of the score to *The Secret Garden*), and "Unwitting Trio" is cleverly built as an interior dialogue that, unlike many of the other compositions, appropriately advances the storyline. Most of the musical numbers, though, seem to be built around a single, simple theme or idea, as if Dixon is stretching one note into an entire song.



And then there's the eventual revelation of "whodunit," when this production that has been designed as a dramatic comedy descends into the farcical - implausible, corny, and overly self-aware. (A character actually says, "Is he going to sing?" right before the murderer performs a silly, over-the-top tune that doesn't match the tone of anything leading up to it.) Suddenly, it's as if we're seeing the ending to an entirely different show, and it's an especially awkward fit since nothing preceding the climax has even *resembled* farce.

Still, the cast makes a good go at it all. McClain's butler is creepy, snooty, and the most interesting character on the stage... until, that is, Walljasper enters. With his swagger and New York accent, the actor often makes his dialogue even funnier than it was perhaps intended to be - the show is at its most entertaining whenever Walljasper is speaking - and yet he's never hammy or campy. While O'Ryan could be funnier if she played her role as slightly broader, she's also a crowd-pleaser with her line deliveries and (especially) her physical humor. Tapscott brings his dependable brand of wit to his role and an improving vocal quality, which has fuller resonance on his sustained notes. SaLoutos and Miller, meanwhile, offer little nuance, but then again, it's perhaps more that their roles offer little nuance for the actresses, whose talents have been better showcased in past productions at Circa '21.

Whodunit... The Musical would be better served if it stuck to one genre, or better combined those already incorporated. As it is, though, the audience is left not only trying to figure out the

Songs in the Key of "A-a-a-a-a-aa!": Whodunit... the Musical, at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through Ju

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identity of the murderer, but also the identity of the show.

For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733, extension 2, or visit Circa21.com.

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