

With "The Unexpected Guest," Richmond Hill Players' Mystery Is Fully Expected

Written by Jill Walsh

Tuesday, 11 June 2002 18:00

Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo is like something from an actor's dream. With "theatre-in-the-round" seating, high ceilings for easy lighting capability, entryways from four sides, and an intimate acting space, one would think any play could succeed with these standards. Even a weak performance can be positively impacted by quality set pieces and a connection with audience members.

That's not quite the case with Richmond Hill's latest production, Agatha Christie's murder mystery *The Unexpected Guest*. The actors can't seem to hold this slow-moving script together, despite a well-designed set.

Steve Scherer plays the unexpected guest who, on a foggy night in South Wales, stumbles upon a murder scene after his car dies in a ditch. He then becomes obsessed with protecting Mrs. Warwick's innocence, because she will surely be blamed for her husband's murder.

The Unexpected Guest is a typical murder mystery: The show begins with the murder, then there are the interrogations of almost every character, who all have motives to kill the victim, and not until an interesting yet somewhat predictable twist at the end is the true killer revealed. Agatha Christie should have stuck to novel-writing, because this script is dull and incredibly hard to believe when performed.

Of course, actors can't be faulted for a poor script, yet some of the choices in this production – especially the accents – are questionable. For one, if the medical assistant came from Kenya, it's hard to believe he would have a spotless American accent with perfect articulation. Also, with the play set in Wales, wouldn't British dialects work best for *all* characters and not just a few? Either use accents for everybody or take them out completely, because the inconsistency strained the script's believability even further.

Even with those problems, some acting ability shone through, especially with young Andy Lord, who is perfectly bumbling as Warwick's son. Greg Cripple's portrayal of Julian is sly, witty, and the most believable as an Englishman.

However, Mrs. Warwick (Laura Holgersson) had facial expressions that were, in the first act, impressive, but as the show progressed, the nose-crinkles and eyebrow-raises were painful to watch. Scherer plays the unexpected guest with a non-committal ease, which is both frustrating and reassuring; it is uncertain whether he is sincerely concerned with the actions of his character, or just watching the show from the outside.

Moments of comic relief almost save the rest of the show, especially the subtle actions of Inspector Thomas (Dave Rash) and his assistant, Sergeant Cadwallader (Stan Weimer).

The set designer committed nicely to a safari motif that fits the script, and at the same time didn't use so many props that the actors were stumbling over each other in the intimate stage space.

The outcome of *The Unexpected Guest* is too easy to predict, and it's difficult to see why director Clyde Walter chose this script. The actors gamely used given circumstances to slowly

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get through the show, but they struggled with the material. Agatha Christie's murder mystery is better on the page than the stage, a lesson that Richmond Hill theatre company has learned the hard way.

The Unexpected Guest at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo continues June 13, 14, 15, and 16. Curtain is at 8 p.m., except for 4 p.m. shows on Sunday. For reservations, call (309)944-2244 or visit (<http://www.rhplayers.com>). Tickets are \$7.