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## Bucks County Review: 'Clue: On Stage'

By Neal Zoren

Silliness and sophistication take turns and elide giddily in director Hunter Foster's smartly diverting world premiere staging of "Clue: On Stage" at New Hope's Bucks County Playhouse.

Amusement reigns, especially when versatile Carson Elrod reveals his suave bag of urbane tricks, headliner Sally Struthers demonstrates how timing and years of acquired know-how can eke guffaws out of mush, or in Miss Struthers's case, soup. Choreographer Jennifer Cody gets surefire mileage from both synchronized movement and scattershot mayhem, and Michael Holland's slyly commenting music, played with panache by Tom Fosnocht, finds the perfect chord to add a comic layer to any situation characters face.

"Clue: On Stage" — with sharp writing, creative direction, and a cast that has a knack for being funny individually and in ensemble — is constantly entertaining. Yet it sorrowfully lacks a few critical elements that would propel it from being a frothy flapdoodle to a full-fledged confection that could travel easily from summer stock to theaters across the country. Those elements — like silliness and sophistication — also begins with an "s." It's suspense and substance, something to grab our interest and hold our attention while we're admiring the talent around us.

"Clue" may keep you laughing, but it never goes beyond being a collection of shtick. Good shtick excellently executed, but shtick. And ultimately disappointing because little ever advances beyond a bunch of colorful people — plum, mustard, peacock; you know the game — going about in high dudgeon about a murderer being in their midst but never seeming to be involved in a genuine mystery with palpable clues providing the fun of whodunit.

The show is based on a 1985 movie that is based on a board game, with a plot devised by screenwriter Jonathan Lynn to employ the figures we know so well from playing the game.

For "Clue's" world premiere stage piece, Lynn's script was adapted and updated by Eric Price and Foster. As crafters of snappy one-liners, cunning double entendres, and great comebacks to great set-ups, Lynn, Price, and Foster did an admirable job. Elrod, Struthers, and castmates Erin Dilly, Cassandra Dupler, Claire Simba, and William Youmans make the most of the dialogue they are given, and that dialogue crackles.

But it's not speech. It's gagwriting. The jokes go a long way, and you don't get tired of them, but they

lead nowhere.

The audience has to be dealt into the game, in the way Agatha Christie invites them to sleuth in “And Then There Were None” and countless other plays in which people are isolated in a locked or distant place and have to figure out who among them is a threat.

Yes, there are details and an attempt to give “Clue” some context. The play is set in 1954 and contains multiple references to McCarthyism and the hunt for communists. It alludes to corruption in all divisions of Washington government, from the state department to the bribing for political favors of a congressman’s wife (Struthers). For all McCarthy, etc. matter, the company might as well set their piece in current times. Think of the wise cracks that can derive from today’s Washington.

Even as “Clue” stands, it’s worth a visit. That comedy is not penny ante. Its quality and intelligence, even when slapstick, is the reason I believe the adapters can go so much further.

Carson Elrod, as a butler, is the engine that makes the comedy work. His character is sardonic and supercilious, so his lines can be as well. A lot of what is said, especially when it comes to literal answers to figurative questions, is bright, perceptive, and obviously from a mind that knows the world and takes an amusedly jaundiced view of it.

Jennifer Cody’s movement design is no less sharp and cutting. Cody divinely employs the cautious tiptoe frequently used by characters in mysteries while finding myriad opportunity to implant physical jokes and other comic niceties.

Michael Holland’s contribution is inspired. While “Clue” is not a musical — no one sings or dances out of context — it is accompanied throughout by live keyboard or synthesizer music. Holland is a master in combining the derivative, melodies that signal danger or the melodramatic, with passages that really capture, if not set, the tone of a scene or situation.

Anna Louizos’s Matryoshka doll of a set is no less a wonder and deftly solves the challenge of making one small set appear to be several rooms — and even includes a hidden stairway. Hers is a grand feat of clever illusion.

Then there’s more from Elrod, who can do pratfalls as well as he can fire off ripostes. And Struthers, who knows how to extend a bit for extra laughs but never goes too far or seems to be consciously milking her big moments.

In the end, fun wins, but it would be nice to have fun and a thriller at the same time.

Clue: On Stage, Bucks County Playhouse, 70 South Main Street, New Hope, PA. Through Saturday, May 20. Show times are 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 p.m. Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday. \$40 to \$75. 215-862-2121 or [www.bcptheatre.org](http://www.bcptheatre.org).