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STAGE REVIEW: Rolling the Die With 'Clue'

- By Anthony Stoeckert

May 18, 2017



Photo by Joan Marcus

The cast of "Clue" at Bucks County Playhouse.

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A lot of comedies hit their high notes early on and have trouble maintaining the laughter as the show goes on. "Clue on Stage" does just the opposite. For much of its 90 minutes, the play is pleasant enough, and offers a few laughs, but it's nothing special. Then there is an inspired bit at the end that drew howls from the audience.

I don't want to say much about that moment, but I will say it is a tour de force for Carson Elrod, who plays Wadsworth, the butler (of course there's a butler). This is a character who is very proper and formal throughout, and when Elrod gets his moment to let it all hang out, he does it brilliantly. He expresses shock, frustration, gets ridiculously emotional over a cat, and throws in a line that is right out the day's headlines. Of course, there's been a lot of news since I saw "Clue" and that joke about the FBI already is outdated, but maybe Elrod will have something else up his sleeve.

The play is based on a movie, which was based on the board game. The setup is classic: On a foggy night in 1954, a group of people who don't know each other (for the most part) are invited to Mr. Boddy's New England mansion. None of them know why, but one thing they have in common is that they're all being blackmailed by their host (William Youmans, playing one of several parts).

The guests are greeted by Wadsworth, who tells them (and the audience) just enough to keep the story going. Wadsworth appears to be a mere servant and is following his boss' instructions. We're shown the rooms from the game (the study, conservatory, kitchen, etc.) and also the weapons (revolver, candlestick, wrench, and whatnot).

The characters are all broad types. Colonel Mustard (Kevin Carolan) works at the Pentagon, but is a bit dim, it takes him a few seconds longer than everyone else to figure things out. Mrs. White (Erin Dilly) is widowed, dressed in black but rather unsentimental about her two late husbands.

Mrs. Peacock (Sally Struthers) is the wife of a congressman, and is prone to taking bribes. Mr. Green (Brian J. Carter) is a government employee, who's fearful that his homosexuality could cost him his career. Miss Scarlet (Lindsay Nicole Chambers) runs an escort service in Washington, business is good since there are 535 members of Congress, and they're all married.

What these colorful suspects have in common is their connection to Washington, and that they're being blackmailed by Boddy. Eventually, we'll learn that all characters in the play — including the cook, the maid, and visitors — have more going on than meets the eye.

There are a few murders, and I think the show misses an opportunity to bring some suspense to the evening. Comedy is the order here, and writers Jonathan Lynn (who's credited as the author of the screenplay) and Eric Price and Hunter Foster (credited as contributing "additional material," Foster also directs) keep the show light and airy, but I don't think a moment or two of suspense would have thrown off the pace.

There are some humorous bits, such as Struthers gulping down soup everyone else finds inedible, and a Yiddish-inspired dance number led by Duncan's Professor Plumb. But this show has the thinnest of plots, so thin it's just 90 minutes and it still includes a bit where the characters run around to Benny Goodman's "Sing Sing Sing" (an amazing piece of music, but my goodness, it's so over-used). There's also a lot of running around, and even a re-cap of the plot that leads to the great payoff at the end.

The sets by Anna Louizos are terrific. Boddy's mansion is massive with multiple rooms, and walls move swiftly to create different rooms. Lighting by Ryan O'Gara creates a mysterious, foggy look at times.

There are a few nods to the board games, including secret passages, and a joke about Monopoly. My favorite is that a dossier in an envelope that looks like the one that comes with the game.

"Clue On Stage" continues at the Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope Pennsylvania, through May 21. For tickets and information, go to www.bcptheater.org or call 215-862-2121.