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Review: Theatre Orangeville?s Murder at Ackerton Manor delivers killer performance

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Murder at Ackerton Manor is a hilarious escapade that will keep you guessing with every turn and every twist.

Without spoiling Theatre Orangeville's latest production, it's hard to describe exactly what you're in for when you sit down to watch Murder at Ackerton Manor. It's obviously a murder mystery, reminiscent of Agatha Christie classics.

The story centers around the murder of the bombastic Roger Ackerton (Jamie Cavanagh), Lord of Ackerton Manor, who finds himself murdered rather dramatically by unknown forces shortly following a dinner party.

With no other options, the police are called, and an eccentric and specifically Belgian detective soon arrives, introducing himself as Pierre Pierrot (Jamie Cavanagh), assigned to solve the case.

With stormy weather and a warm body on their hands, he confines everyone to the manor. No one leaves or comes in until the case is resolved and the guilty party is arrested.

The detective has to work through an equally eccentric collection of characters who all have various connections to Roger Ackerton and potentially motives for wanting him dead. They include: the Butler, Curtis (Tyrone Savage), Ariadne Ackerton (Christy Bruce), Sterling the gardener (Tyrone Savage), one Bavarian professor (Christy Bruce) and a wealthy southern woman (Tyrone Savage).

The plot is a love letter to Agatha Christie's classic literature, blending subtle, distinct movements and lines with plot twists that'll catch most off guard. You'll find plenty of subtle details layered throughout the story that might just give you some hints about the guilty party, and it is a joy to try to piece it together.

But all of that detail and nuance is compounded with another element, the chaotic comedy of Mel Brooks.

While each character is subtle and layered, they're also loud, eccentric and charming in their own way. Curtiss the butler is over-the-top British, Pierrot is stereotypical French, and their Bavarian professor is very German.

Put together, this wacky cast stumbles its way through a very serious murder mystery with tons of laughs and plenty of memorable moments that'll make you say ?I should've seen that coming!? at nearly every turn.

That's the beauty of this play, and what makes it such a joy to watch. Done seriously, this story will have many more hints or noticeable details that would clue audiences into the killer earlier on, but each character is so wacky and over the top that you get more distracted by their larger-than-life personalities that you fail to notice they are still moving with a very distinct purpose.

More than a few blink-and-you'll-miss-it moments will fly by you, but that's part of the fun.

This is a murder mystery that doesn't take itself seriously, not at first anyway, but is still loaded with deliberate detail that one could enjoy as both a comedy and a mystery plot, or one could enjoy both at once.

What truly sold this production was the tremendous skill of the cast.

Jamie Cavanagh brought a truly explosive presence to the stage that undoubtedly set up the play for success. His introduction as

Roger Ackerton was loud, obnoxious and demanding, a perfect introduction to the rich, egotistical victim not many people would mourn.

He plays a perfect British aristocrat in all his pompous glory, and projects his voice so well you'd think he was yelling at you in the back row to bring his dinner immediately.

This skill wasn't exclusive, as he brought a hilarious performance to Pierre Pierrot, the Belgian detective. Pierrot reminded me a lot of Inspector Clouseau from The Pink Panther. Somewhat clumsy, but dedicated.

Christy Bruce also brought compelling performances to her roles. Roger Ackerton's sister, Ariadne Ackerton, was a very three-dimensional character, embodying multiple overlapping goals and strategies into one very interesting woman.

From the moment you meet her, you can tell she has a lot of pieces at play, with many subtle details you'll have to observe for yourself. There's more to that woman than meets the eye.

Bruce's performance as the Bavarian professor was likely one of the wackiest and most entertaining parts of the performance. I imagine being told to throw on some lederhosen, don a thick German accent, and stroll on stage must have been as entertaining for her as it was for the audience. Every scene with the professor was hilarious.

Last but certainly not least, Tyrone Savage was a one-man army on stage. Juggling three characters on a good day is difficult, but doing all three in a fast-paced play is incredible work.

Savage did an expert job switching from an uptight, rigid butler to a dirty, slouching gardener, and then, of course, a woman in a bright red dress. All three characters are so radically different and change so frequently that it would be easy to make mistakes, but that didn't happen once, at least not in my view.

Savage made each character memorable, funny, and dynamic, alongside the entire cast.

On one or two occasions, I did observe some of the accents getting away a bit, sometimes becoming difficult to understand or follow, likely a result of the accents being exaggerated by design. This led to a couple of minutes of slight confusion as I felt like I could have missed an important detail, with this being a mystery and a clue-based plot.

I think grounding the accents slightly when characters are emoting strongly, or yelling, would fix this issue easily, as it only really presented itself in those specific moments.

The set design was also impressive and well executed. For a moment, I felt like I really was dropped into a Victorian-era mansion and not sitting in a theatre chair. It felt warm, lived in, and dynamic.

All the furniture was utilized, rather than simply placed as decoration.

The actors made full use of the stage, moving to the very front edge, to the very back, and treated it like a real room, touching things and adjusting items. While that is barely noticeable at first, it adds an extra level of immersion that improves the overall visuals of the scene.

Overall, the production is extremely well crafted, with a brilliantly designed set supporting a larger-than-life cast that will leave you guessing and laughing.

Murder at Ackerton Manor is absolutely worth the watch, maybe even two viewings, so be sure to catch it while it's available.