

British Theatre Guide

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The Mousetrap

Agatha Christie

Mousetrap Productions

Gala Durham

14–19 September 2015

Considering *The Mousetrap* is the longest-running theatre play in history, it's strange to consider that if you stopped 100 people in the street, it's unlikely any one of them could name a single character.

Famously, audiences are given a personal plea at the play's end not to reveal the ingenious twist and a contract states no film of the play can be made until more than six months after the West End runs finally ends. On current form, this may be a couple of centuries away. But, 63 years on, the company has finally decided to mount the first UK tour.

I suspect the play's huge popularity comes greatly from a nostalgic yearning plus a curiosity at the longevity (which could be self-perpetuating). Yet in one way the main mystery about *The Mousetrap* is not who is the murderer but exactly why it is so successful.

Agatha Christie wrote much better stuff and it's not a play anyone would consider seeing twice, unlike say Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which was born one year later (1953).

Durham's Gala Theatre was packed (mainly with an audience of a certain age) as the curtain went up on the sumptuous set of the great hall of Monkswell Manor (no set designer credited), all high, wood-panelled walls, classical oil paintings and high, stained glass windows.

Eight people gathered in this country house cut off by snow discover one of their group is a murderer and is likely to murder again. If this sounds hackneyed, remember it was mainly Christie who popularised such plots. And how come we might talk of it being dated while we never consider the 400-year-old plays of Shakespeare as being dated? That could be a good 'O' Level Drama question.

Hang on though—Beckett, now Shakespeare mentioned in a review of *The Mousetrap*? Blimey.

There is a certain affection for the piece which means the public brings to it a tolerance of its many absurdities, the creaky cardboard cut-out characters, the many plot conveniences, the often artificial-sounding dialogue.

Director Ian Watt-Smith often compounds these problems by his interpretation. The hyperactive young man Wren (Edward Elgood) whose high falsetto giggle becomes increasingly annoying is straight from a Billy Bunter novel. The mysterious Italian Paravicini (Jonathan Sidswick) is rendered so stereotypical we expect him any moment to break out into "Just One Cornetto" or "Go Compare".

Against this, the character of Major Metcalf (William Ilkley) seems almost invisible and to have so little to do with anything for a long time I wondered if he'd just wandered in off the street. Detective Trotter (Luke Jenkins) enters in a foul mood and never gets out of it, every line spat out with a short-tempered venom that makes the phrase 'light and shade' redundant.

Esther McAuley and Alex Wadham as the guest house's new owners, Hester Arden as the aloof Miss Casewell and Anne Cavanagh as the crusty older woman Miss Boyle complete the unlikely assemblage of personages and no complaints over their acting talents. I also accept the denouement brings a kind of theatrical redemption for some of the character interpretations, but it's still a long two-and-a-half-hour journey to get there.

My misfortune is to have heard a radio programme some years ago when a comedian, no doubt considering himself subversive, revealed the twist (which even the harshest critic cannot deny is clever). Thus 90 per cent of my own interest had already gone.

The Mousetrap is an historical phenomenon and any theatre piece that can fill struggling provincial theatres should not be too lightly dismissed. In some way it is as comforting as a glass of dandelion & burdock. But a good play it isn't.

Fans of trivia may be interested to know the only voice to have survived since the first performance in Nottingham in 1952 is that of Derek Guyler reading the radio news bulletin.

Reviewer: [Peter Mortimer](#)