



Theater review: Lakewood production enhances humor in Agatha Christie's 'The Hollow'

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A country house with a glowing fireplace, a chief inspector in a fedora, a butler in white gloves, cocktails before dinner. We're back in Agatha Christie country, perhaps a valley with hills above, in "The Hollow," a three-act whodunit currently at Lakewood Theater. It's the 1950s, and modern life is around the corner, but hasn't quite arrived. You still ask the operator for a number when phoning out, and hanging is the punishment for murder by British law.

Christie published the novel version in 1946, which originally featured Hercule Poirot as the detective who solves the crime.

Later, she wrote him out of the play, confessing she really didn't

like him very much. We scarcely miss the plump Belgian, mainly because the gaggle of main characters are so interesting and well-crafted on their own that the murder nearly gets upstaged by these hardy, upper-class English folk, members of the Angkatell family, who are loosely related, but tight as ticks.

Into their midst come Dr. John Cristow (Grant Turner) and his wife Gerda (Lucy Paschall). He's outspoken, self-centered and critical of his spouse: She's adoring, acquiescent and unaware of the fact that he's a philanderer. His unhappy girlfriend on the side is a member of the household, young, pretty Henrietta Angkatell (Melissa Whitney), a sculptress whose abstract pieces provide the only contemporary touches in the house. To stir up the story, another woman from Cristow's past enters the scene as the family and their guests are about to dine: Up the road in the village lives Veronica Craye (Christy Bigelow), an English actress who has become a Hollywood movie star. Cristow was engaged to her ten years ago, but broke it off, and he hasn't seen her since, though apparently she's been yearning to see him. Meanwhile, Edward Angkatell (Nathan P. Gale) is in love with Henrietta, but learns she's been seeing Cristow. Sir Henry Angkatell (Scott Parker), head of the household, conveniently collects pistols, so when one of them goes off just outside the drawing room and fells the good doctor, the suspects pile up in a hurry.

Christie made the characters so interesting and well-crafted that they nearly upstage the murder story when it finally unfolds. The actors take advantage of this, and director Don Alder, a regular at Lakewood who directs a lot of their Christie offerings, helps enhance the delightful humor inherent in the script. Georgia Cacy Mitchell is delicious as the scatter-brained, eccentric Lady Angkatell: Underneath her forgetfulness is a shrewd intelligence that Mitchell latches onto (she absent-mindedly carries in a lobster from the kitchen, hoping to check its color against the couch for a possible shade of red for new throw pillows).

As young Edward, Gale creates a likable nerd with interesting body language that appears to take its cue from musical comedy. He tends to shrink when Cristow's larger personality inhabits the room. Brit Lucy Paschall slips effortlessly into the role of Gerda, straight-laced and uptight, yet one can see why Cristow married her: There's a sweetness that permeates her character. The statuesque, red-lipped, sleek Veronica is the most cardboard figure of all, not well-matched with Turner as she towers over him, yet Bigelow manages to bring an arch humor to the actress, who's equally selfish and self-centered as Cristow. John Morrison's butler Gudgeon appears to have wandered in out of the film "Remains of the Day." He's straight-backed, expressionless and relentlessly polite, the perfect servant. Like Gale's performance, his is highly physical, but never overdone. And in the smaller role of the maid Doris, Bonnie Auguston shone, particularly in a brief scene added by Adler that had her dancing to vintage radio tunes with a feather duster in hand.

Jeff seat's glorious set and the lighting design by Kurt Herman, a backdrop of a blue glow upstage beyond the French doors give us the sense of a grand house set in a valley of sorts. The uncredited sound design, a series of romantic jazz tunes from yesteryear, plumped up the production. And Allison Dawe's costumes were dead-on, no pun intended.