

Visit Richmond Hill's 'Guest'

Quad City Times – June 13, 2002 - by Ruby Nancy

Agatha Christie's "The Unexpected Guest" is one of her many murder mysteries, and as a "cozy," it follows her usual pattern.

There's no gross or bloody mess, and no graphic murders take place on stage. In fact, the hated character, Richard Warwick, is already dead when the play begins. Lights go up on Warwick's widow standing near the body, with a gun in her hand, but there is some doubt about whether she is the one who shot him.

More suspects also soon emerge, and the police finally settle on a man named MacGregor as the most likely killer — then find out he has been dead for more than two years. As is traditional for this kind of material, the real murderer is only revealed in the final few minutes of the play. Once or twice you are absolutely sure you know who did it, and then you begin to wonder about someone else.

Though the first 15 or 20 minutes drag a bit, several fine performances enliven "Unexpected Guest" and the story tightens quickly, building up to a surprising conclusion.

Susan Holgersson is very good as the new widow. Though she does not play Laura Warwick as the hard-edged femme fatale trophy wife Christie probably had in mind when she wrote this part, Holgersson gives the role more depth — a softness, grace and humanity I actually like much better. She is dazed, angry, sad, relieved, hopeful, furtive and confused by turn, and her pretty, mobile face plays every emotion in an authentic way that gets to you in a way no one-dimensional character ever could.

As the controlled but sympathetic Michael Starkwedder (the "Guest") Steve Scherer does truly excellent work. His sudden appearance, like the murder itself, proves to be something of a catalyst for all sorts of confessions and uncovered secrets in the Warwick household. Through his patient ear we learn about the secret loves, hatreds, motives and ambitions of all the characters. His quiet, sparse, perfectly timed questions and alert gaze help the audience see many things more clearly.

There is a long line of likely suspects: Jackie Skiles is the manipulative housekeeper, Wanda Deitrick is Warwick's cold, stern mother, and Andy Lord is Warwick's simpleminded, gun-obsessed brother. Reggie Jarrell, who plays Angell, Warwick's former nurse, is deliciously greedy and oblique. As Julian Farrar, Greg Cripple is the perfect politician. Cripple's work here is as good as Scherer's, and is possibly the best work he's done in the last few years.

Also trying to solve the mystery are Stan Weimer, a bumbling police sergeant, and the always wonderful Dave Rash, an occasionally oblivious Inspector Thomas. These two provide comic ventilation as well as exposition.

Any fan of mystery should be perfectly happy to see "The Unexpected Guest."

Richmond Hill Players' Mystery Is Fully Expected

River Cities' Reader – June 12, 2002 - by Jill Pearson

Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo is like something from an actor's dream. With "theatre-in-the-round" seating, high ceilings for easy lighting capability, entryways from four sides, and an intimate acting space, one would think any play could succeed with these standards. Even a weak performance can be positively impacted by quality set pieces and a connection with audience members. That's not quite the case with Richmond Hill's latest production, Agatha Christie's murder mystery *The Unexpected Guest*. The actors can't seem to hold this slow-moving script together, despite a well-designed set.

Steve Scherer plays the unexpected guest who, on a foggy night in South Wales, stumbles upon a murder scene after his car dies in a ditch. He then becomes obsessed with protecting Mrs. Warwick's innocence, because she will surely be blamed for her husband's murder.

The Unexpected Guest is a typical murder mystery: The show begins with the murder, then there are the interrogations of almost every character, who all have motives to kill the victim, and not until an interesting yet somewhat predictable twist at the end is the true killer revealed. Agatha Christie should have stuck to novel-writing, because this script is dull and incredibly hard to believe when performed.

Of course, actors can't be faulted for a poor script, yet some of the choices in this production – especially the accents – are questionable. For one, if the medical assistant came from Kenya, it's hard to believe he would have a spotless American accent with perfect articulation. Also, with the play set in Wales, wouldn't British dialects work best for *all* characters and not just a few? Either use accents for everybody or take them out completely, because the inconsistency strained the script's believability even further.

Even with those problems, some acting ability shone through, especially with young Andy Lord, who is perfectly bumbling as Warwick's son. Greg Cripple's portrayal of Julian is sly, witty, and the most believable as an Englishman.

However, Mrs. Warwick (Susan Holgersson) had facial expressions that were, in the first act, impressive, but as the show progressed, the nose-crinkles and eyebrow-raises were painful to watch. Scherer plays the unexpected guest with a non-committal ease, which is both frustrating and reassuring; it is uncertain whether he is sincerely concerned with the actions of his character, or just watching the show from the outside.

Moments of comic relief almost save the rest of the show, especially the subtle actions of Inspector Thomas (Dave Rash) and his assistant, Sergeant Cadwallader (Stan Weimer).

The set designer committed nicely to a safari motif that fits the script, and at the same time didn't use so many props that the actors were stumbling over each other in the intimate stage space.

The outcome of *The Unexpected Guest* is too easy to predict, and it's difficult to see why director Clyde Walter chose this script. The actors gamely used given circumstances to slowly get through the show, but they struggled with the material. Agatha Christie's murder mystery is better on the page than the stage, a lesson that Richmond Hill theatre company has learned the hard way