

Citadel opens with an Agatha Christie classic 'The Mousetrap'

By Myrna Petlicki
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Mary Margaret McCormack and Jack Sharkey play Mollie and Giles Ralston, owners of the deadly Monkswell Manor, in Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," presented Sept. 13-Oct. 15 at Citadel Theatre in Lake Forest. (Ralph Durham/HANDOUT)

There's a reason why Agatha Christie's murder mystery "The Mousetrap" is the longest-running play of all time. You'll find out why when Scott Westerman directs the perennial favorite, performed Sept. 13-Oct. 15 at Citadel Theatre in Lake Forest.

Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, and 3 p.m. Sundays. There will also be a 2 p.m. matinee on Oct. 7 and 1 p.m. matinees on Sept. 20 and 27. There are no performances on Sept. 22 or 29.

Westerman described “The Mousetrap” as “a timeless classic. I like to take those kinds of plays and prove that they are not just little chestnuts, something you can toss away. There’s so much in it that resonates today.”

He praised the work, saying, “It’s intricate, it’s woven, it’s got real heart to it. I’m absolutely excited to do that play, especially with LED panels.”

The director is using 60 of those panels to set the scenes of the play which takes place in a huge Victorian mansion where guests find themselves trapped.

Westerman noted that the guests at the Monkswell Manor where the mystery is set are stuck there when an unexpected blizzard occurs. “I can’t help but think of the increased frequency of severe weather events going on in our society today,” he said.

That wasn’t the only aspect of Christie’s play that resonates today. “She explores gender identity,” Westerman noted. “She puts an outwardly flamboyant gay man onstage and in 1952 that was no small push of the envelope.”

Christie also pits these strangers against each other with them blaming each other’s differences, such as being a foreigner or being gay — something that still occurs today.

Sean Erik Wesslund plays Sergeant Trotter, who appears in the middle of the snowstorm after a murder has taken place.

The murder mystery fan reported that “The Mousetrap” was one of the first plays that he read when he was a theater major in college and it peaked his interest back then.

“Sergeant Trotter is very determined,” Wesslund said. “He is a very creative and very intelligent investigator. He also is pretty good at improvising as new problems come up. He can get a little bit frustrated with some of the other personalities in the house but he is ultimately pretty adept at navigating them and finding his way to the truth.”

Wesslund reported that he is enjoying processing Sergeant Trotter's various plans through the detective's lens. The challenge of the role, he added, "is trying to keep up mentally with how quickly he changes plans."

This is the fourth murder mystery for Mary Margaret McCormack who plays Mollie Ralston, the proprietor of Monkswell Manor with her husband Giles (Jack Sharkey).

She is a fan of the genre because, "It's fun to not reveal to the audience if you're guilty or not. You have to walk that fine line and not be too obvious you are or are not the murderer," she explained.

In terms of her character Mollie Ralston, McCormack said, "She has a goal and she goes for it. She has some secrets I think she's running away from even though she doesn't want to admit it. She comes off at first as a typical Englishwoman, quiet but gets things done. But underneath, she has some darker history she's trying to avoid."

McCormack didn't want to give away the surprises but she noted, "We have some fun tech things going on."

Wesslund concluded that the show is "a fun, dynamic, interesting, difficult to figure out mystery."

'The Mousetrap'

When: Sept. 13-Oct. 15

Where: Citadel Theatre, 300 S. Waukegan Road, Lake Forest

Tickets: \$40-\$45; \$20 for previews Sept. 13-14

Information: 847-735-8554, ext. 1; citadeltheatre.org

Myrna Petlicki is a freelance reporter for Pioneer Press.