

'Sleuth' mystery without challenge

By ETHEL SIMMONS

"Sleuth," the current offering at Meadow Brook Theatre, is an English murder mystery with enough plot twists to keep you in perpetual surprise.

Except for incidental characters, the two men in leading roles have to carry the show. They vie against one another in gamesmanship, but in this production we, the audience, don't really feel challenged.

"Sleuth" is a delicate balance between the English gentleman, with all his tradition, snobbishness and prejudices, and the lower-class upstart, who dares to invade the upper-class world despite being of the wrong eth-

nic and religious background.

Both the gentleman, Andrew Wyke (Clive Rosengren) and the young pretender, Milo Tindle (Fred Thompson) are rather distasteful fellows. Each has charm of sorts, cleverness and a determination to win.

YOU CAN'T really sympathize with either of them. What's more, the Meadow Brook stars don't have a spirited rapport in their adversary relationship.

You find yourself not rooting for Wyke, the mystery writer, who hosts the action in his country house at Wilshire, or for Tindle, the slick, poised travel agent from London who wants to marry Wyke's wife.

I found myself more attuned to Tindle, primarily because Wyke seemed full of bluster. In Rosengren's portrayal of the gentleman, there was too much pomposity from the start. The shifts in character that see Wyke's exterior crumble were not shaded with the enormous subtlety the part requires.

Thompson, as Tindle, was not quite as much the gigolo as he could have been. His pursuit of Wyke's wife, Margo, appeared less calculating than the plot insisted (for example, he agrees to steal her jewels and force them, in a scheme with Wyke).

On the whole, the ruthlessness of his character was not brought out; he appeared to be a rather nice guy, who

was about to take Margo away from a thoroughly despicable husband.

"SLEUTH," written by Anthony Shaffer, is basically just a mystery story. There are many startling effects, especially having Tindle wear a clown suit to perform the burglary. This masquerade adds a touch of the macabre, an uneasy comedy to the proceedings.

The costume also points up his lousiness and his humiliation that is to ensue.

Larry A. Reed, set and lighting designer, has created a scene of comfortable English country house interior, a cozy book-lined study where several chess sets on tables around the room

give a clue to the rivalry of two superior games players.

A sheer curtain, showing the exterior of the country house, broods over the stage set, putting the audience in the mood.

Author Shaffer has attempted to develop his characters by showing Tindle discover a cruel strength as he moves past fear and Wyke weakens. The class struggle is only a veneer on the plot, and the play (although it has been a hit on Broadway and in the movies) lacks the stimulating force that really good theater deserves.

"Sleuth," directed by Vincent Dowling, will run at Meadow Brook through Feb. 20.



Milo Tindle (Fred Thompson) explains.

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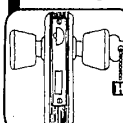
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