

Entertainment

Ethel Simmons editor/644-1100



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Puzzler play: Agatha Christie's 'Spider's Web' is neatly spun at Meadow Brook



Judith Klein is Pippa, an English schoolgirl, and William Le Massone is Sir Rowland Delahaye who helps solve the mystery.

Performances of "Spider's Web" by Agatha Christie continue through Sunday, May 12, at Meadow Brook Theatre on the Oakland University campus near Rochester. For ticket information call 377-3300.

Meadow Brook's attractive production of Agatha Christie's "Spider's Web" is faithful to her mystery formula, which decrees that the puzzle must be the main thing.

Dame Agatha preferred not to clutter up her intricate plots with detours into character development. The assortment of upper-class Britishers in the play remain largely two-dimensional, but director Terence Kilburn makes them both lively and engaging, and he handles the humor with a broad hand, a style that has stamped many of Meadow Brook's most

popular plays this season. In this mystery-comedy, the characters are the stock variety Pippa, the young girl, is always hungry and has a dirty neck because such is the way of "stock" children. In "Spider's Web" one Oliver Costello (Paul Vincent) visits the recently rented country estate of the Hailsham-Browns in Act I and turns up murdered behind the sofa in Act II. A handful of characters have plausible motives for having done it.

CLARISSA, WIFE of the distinguished Henry Hailsham-Brown, could have "eliminated" the man because he threatened to take her stepdaughter, Pippa, away to live with her drug addict mother. Or Pippa could have done it because she is loath to go. Or Elgin, the butler, with his anonymous seditious past.

What English mystery

worthy of the name could be without a butler as a suspect? Or the respected Henry Hailsham-Brown might turn out to be not so respectable. Then there's the overbearing gardener Mildred Peak, who clearly knows more than she admits and might be guilty. Peggy Thorp turns in a delightful performance as Mildred, the gardener with the delicacy of a bulldozer.

Inspector Lord, played engagingly by Arthur Beer, must untangle the web of motive with help from his Welsh assistant, Constable Jones (Thom Haneline). Besides having to unscramble the facts of the murder, the inspector must contend with the complication that Clarissa concocts stories, several of them, to explain the facts of the case. To officers of the law, such imaginary concoctions go by the hard-nosed name, lies. The best humor in



Cathie Breidenbach

the play evolves from Clarissa's invented explanations.

Barbara Barringer as Clarissa floats about the stage calling people "darling" and laughing her agreeable fake laugh. She's consciously charming to her husband Henry (David Fox) and to stepdaughter, Pippa, played as a cardboard English schoolgirl by Judith Klein.

CLARISSA ALSO charms two aristocratic old cronies, Sir Rowland Delahaye and Hugo Birch. William LeMassone and Joseph Reed are thoroughly believable as the venerable pair who ultimately solve the puzzle

after they complicate the investigation by making alibis for Clarissa.

Jeremy Warrender, played by Peter Gregory Thomson, is a well-bred young gentleman visiting the estate. In true mystery style, he has an agenda of his own, although he joins with the old cronies to protect Clarissa and halfheartedly tries to woo her.

The drawing room of a country estate figures as an additional character in the mystery plot. With

a secret panel, a desk with hidden drawers and a malevolent history as a house whose former owner died mysteriously, the estate contributes to the intrigue.

Set designer Peter Hicks creates an elegant room with high ceilings and French doors, a room worthy of the role.

"Spider's Web" has seldom been produced this side of the Atlantic despite its popularity in England.

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