

The Play Produced

Death by Fatal Murder

By Peter Gordon

Director Maureen Nickson

Discusses this production by the Charity Players of
Preston

Introduction

The Charity Players formed in 1991, when a group of local thespians led by Charity fundraiser John Nickson formed a partnership with the Charter Theatre Preston, to produce at least two plays a year in aid of the local Hospice,

St Catherine's, caring for the terminally ill, based at Lostock Hall, Preston.

We draw from the huge local drama talent, that we are so fortunate to have in the Preston, Chorley and South Ribble areas. Since its formation the players have raised over £120,000 for St Catherine's, a **'formidable'** amount of which we are so very proud. Peter Gordon's plays alone have raised a staggering **£ 21,000!**

Our strength is in farces and comedies, played in a professional theatre (800 seater) with the added bonus of a professional crew. These factors enable us to get 'bums on seats' and although we are an am/dram group we like to think that we would give professionals a run for their money. Our support lies with the people of Preston and surrounding areas and is made up of folk who enjoy 'Live Theatre' at its very best.

Following the success of our first Peter Gordon play 'Murdered to Death' we were intrigued to find out if he had written any sequels and to our delight we discovered he had written a follow up - 'Secondary Cause of Death', which we performed in May 2005. We invited Peter and his delightful wife Janice to the show. I had also directed this play and although somewhat nervous of the author's presence, I was confident that we had done justice to the script and with the inclusion of many visual gags; we had a very funny show on our

hands. Peter was delighted (*to our utmost relief*) he had thoroughly enjoyed the performance and later in the bar after a '*couple of pints*' informed us of the third 'Pratt' play which he was just completing. It may have been the beer talking but he was confident enough for us to showcase the new play for him. We of course accepted the challenge with open arms as this was a real 'feather in our cap' not only for the Charity Players but more importantly an opportunity to raise much needed funds for St Catherine's Hospice.

The Play

'Death by Fatal Murder' was a 'World Premiere' for the Charity Players as we were the first group to present it. With the success of 'Murdered to Death' and 'Secondary Cause of Death' under our belts, we were more than happy to take on Pratt's last stand as it were, to complete the trilogy.

Yes, the infamous Defective Inspector Pratt was once again at large at 'Bagshot House' where mayhem ensues. Aided and abetted by local amateur sleuth Miss Maple, he meets up with the new owner Nancy Allwright and his side kick Constable Thomkins who adds fluency to Pratt's 'brainpower'.

The upper crust Virginia Farquahah and Italian Enzo Garibaldi assist with inquiries, but danger soon looms with the unexpected arrival of Nancy's missing husband Squadron Leader 'Stiffy' Allwright. Welsh busy body and clairvoyant Blodwyn Morgan proceeds to create further mayhem with her somewhat suspect séance.

This Agatha Christie spoof has all the ingredients of a Murder Mystery, a comedy thriller, filled with colourful characters that put Pratt's detective work to the test.

CASTING

The Charity Players don't have a membership as such, although we do have a core group of players. We are fortunate to be able to draw from the many local talented and experienced actors in the area, players are usually invited to join the cast once the Director is assigned and we rarely audition.

The demanding role of Inspector Pratt an incompetent, bumbling policeman requires lots of energy and vital comic timing. Having already played the Inspector on two previous occasions John Nickson

seems to have made the part his own, so he went for the hat trick, with the trademark raincoat and hat.

We recalled our previous dependable Constable Thomkins who was more than happy to take on the role once more. For the Miss Maple character it was essential to have an experienced actor, who appears gentle and somewhat confused but underneath is quite controlling, this part has a reasonable amount of dialogue, especially in the denouement. The parts of Enzo, Blodwyn and Virginia all call on actors who can master accents, whilst Nancy and the Squadron Leader must be solid and sharp. The characters are all exaggerated 'Agatha Christie' stereotypes; they should be played 'straight and big with lots of animation' in order for Pratt to pull off the inept, clumsy walking disaster area that he is. Although Pratt has a huge amount of dialogue and moves seamlessly from joke to joke (both verbal and visual) sending the audience into fits of laughter, this could not be achieved without ensemble playing, which enables the play to succeed.

Rehearsals

We are all very busy people and I like to keep the rehearsal period short, which proves fruitful, as the actors become more aware of the forthcoming production and are conscientious and keen to make things work. Once cast, we held the read through in early May. Peter came along and it was at this stage that he could make some slight and positive alterations to the script whilst it was still in draft form. At this point the actors were given a short summary of their characters and sent away to learn their scripts over the summer. We started rehearsal proper just six weeks before the show, first blocking and moving the whole play then gradually working through the scenes; the players now having accomplished a good working knowledge of their lines, were able to concentrate on the acting and business. Having a reputation of a somewhat hard taskmaster, my aim was to get the best out of all and sundry, by encouragement, supporting them to be confident with their characters and enabling them to reach the next level in their performance, it was vital that we had books down early.

We are fortunate to be able to rehearse in the Garden Room at St Catherine's Hospice and although the play does not require many props, I feel early props are paramount to enable the actors to make use of and become familiar with them. The Sunday before the show was our first full Dress Rehearsal complete with sound and props. We now had a show on our hands!

Scenery

One of the downsides of using the Charter Theatre is that we can only do the 'get in' on the Monday before opening night, which cuts things a bit fine but the upside is that we have use of the theatre crew and their vast experience. Early meetings were imperative with the stage manager to discuss the set design and logistics. The Charter is a very busy theatre, so immediately following the last performance the set is stripped and down within minutes, ready for 'get out'.

A simple box set was required for the guest room in the West Wing of Bagshot House. As in the previous Pratt plays we used a double door entrance up centre, leading off to the main entrance. This lends itself to many visual gags, as we see Pratt walking straight past, by mistake, on numerous occasions, a keystone cop moment for Constable Thomkins, looking right and left and a dramatic entrance for Squadron Leader Allwright. Stage left is a door leading to a room off, in the main house, whilst the 'fourth wall' suggests the presence of a Fireplace, this was achieved by a fire grate (with red light) and companion set.

The Furniture, paintings and props used to dress the set came from our Hospice Charity shops.

Lighting

The action moves from a November evening to the following day, through to midnight and then the following morning. In the first scene we had a dimly lit room with a practical light from the standard lamp and then when Nancy exits to the room off, torch light is created by use of a spot light, set off stage. In the following morning scene, the room was lit up; to generate a window effect we used a gobo that reflected apparent sunlight through to the back wall and room. Most of the Scenes ended in blackout, when we originally tried black, it proved disastrous moving actors off, and so we tried a blue filter light. In the end we reverted to black and used curtain at the end of Act 1 Scene 2 and Act 2 Scene 2.

We also had a practical table lamp on the desk down right. During the séance scene the room was dimly lit and when the candle was lit we brought up the light to provide additional atmosphere. The standard lamp flashes on and off to a Morse code pattern and the timing of this was once again imperative. We were very fortunate to have use of the professional lighting team who are always eager to assist the Charity Players.

Costumes

As this was set in the 1940's we had to research the costumes of that period. In particular for Virginia (Land Army Gal) and the Squadron Leader (RAF Pilot), both these outfits and Miss Maple's Country Tweed Suit we hired from a local Dress Hire Shop. We have of course built up our own wardrobe over the years and I was able to supply most outfits from either wardrobe or the charity shops. I came across a fabulous Egyptian outfit that was superb for Blodwyn's séance scene. The Constable's uniform was on loan and we reclaimed the raincoat and trilby that Pratt wore in the previous plays. As always, costumes immediately lift the characters, when in full dress.

Music

The play does not require music but we included music to open and close the acts and at the end of certain scenes to create a link. I always prefer to choose appropriate house music to warm up the audience before the show and was lucky to come across 'Past Perfect' a compilation of 30's and 40's music. The opening curtain music for both acts was a piece that I had used before from the very talented Vanessa May, violin introduction of the 'Sabre Dance'. This is very atmospheric, creating mystery and intrigue, setting the audience up for perhaps a thriller? We closed both Acts with *Vivaldi's* vibrant '*Four Seasons*'. For the house music at the interval we included 1940's '*crooning music*'. At the close of Act 2 Scene 1, we used curtain instead of black to allow the scene change - whilst this was taking place, we played 'Moonlight Sonata' subsequently we closed the scene with a quick curtain, in order to strike the Séance set, we played Il Divo 'My Way' in Italian. This was quite appropriate as Enzo had just collapsed and died and did create a titter some nights.

Special Effects and Sound

With the use of a smoke machine we created a dramatic entrance for the Squadron Leader and also improvised a fire on the sofa. Through sound we produced the tapping noises, scratching on the door, haunting sound and Pratt falling down stairs. For the final scene the crew rigged up, books falling off shelves, pictures moving, ornaments dropping to the floor, a tail wagging on a stuffed fox and the standard

lamp flashing on and off. This was really effective and they enjoyed setting it up.

Finally

The Charity Players always aim for the very best from all our productions and endeavour to be as professional as the crew and the theatre that we work in. I feel this production was no exception with everyone rising to the challenge. It was amazing to be involved with a 'World Premiere' and at the end of the day the ultimate buzz is to play to packed houses, which we achieved. Personally, I was delighted that we managed to 'pull it off', I was very proud of my troupe and it was a great privilege and pleasure to work so closely with Peter Gordon. We would certainly recommend the 'Pratt Trio'.

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