

## "MURDER ON THE NILE " By Agatha Christie

Reviewed by Ed Townley

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Theatre Three is continuing its self-styled World Tour Season with "Murder on the Nile," a 1946 play by the prolific and popular Agatha Christie, based on her earlier novel, *Death on the Nile*. While not the most memorable or exciting stop on the Theatre Three season tour, the production wisely emphasizes style over substance to bring a workmanlike but uninvolved script to life – at least in fits and starts.

The basics of the clever if far-fetched mystery plot will be familiar not only to readers of the original novel but to those who remember a 1978 film version in which Bette Davis, Angela Lansbury and Maggie Smith engaged in a sort of Olympic scenery-chewing competition. England's wealthiest young socialite has shocked (shocked!) the world by marrying the handsome, charming and penniless Simon Mostyn. They are now spending part of their honeymoon cruising the Nile River on a small paddle steamer, whose other passengers include the usual Christie assortment of characters, including several with 'coincidental' and/or mysterious connections to the happy couple.

Agatha Christie may not have originated it, but she certainly subscribed to the theater rule that if you produce a gun on stage, someone damn well better use it before the end of the play. So the minute the dainty pistol appears, you can be sure that shots will be fired, and consequences will be dire. Misunderstandings will run rampant. Red herrings will be strewn about with wild abandon. Accusations will be made. Frayed emotions will erupt fiercely. And, without giving anything away, let's just say that not every actor will have a significant onstage role in the second act. (The title, please note, is "Murder on the Nile," not "Attempted Murder on the Nile.")

In paring the large cast of characters in the novel down to a more manageable dozen, Agatha Christie made the surprising decision to eliminate her Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot. This is no great loss, in truth, since even the author herself had reportedly grown sick of him. The problem is that it requires certain unlikely characters to suddenly develop those "little grey cells" so that they can replace M. Poirot in bringing to light – and explaining – the complex scheme that – well, I've said enough, except to note that the plot requires so much initial exposition of things that happened before everyone boarded the ship, and so much explanation of things that have been happening elsewhere on the ship, that there is little time or space left for interesting interactions onstage.

Terry Dobson's direction keeps things moving sharply along, and he has imbued the entire production with the appropriate style of period insouciance. He is greatly assisted by the unusual and evocative set designed by Jac Alder. The two-story observation deck thrusts into the theater space, with dark shadows all around to emphasize the isolation. (The script reminds us several times that 'No one can get on or off this ship.' You'll have to supply your own sting chord.)

Even better are the elegant – and plentiful! – costumes designed by Bruce R. Coleman. From elegant to functional to appropriately tacky, they often tell us more about the characters than the script does. Paul Arnold's lighting design includes a fair number of mood-setting effects, and Richard Frohlich has created a sound design that conjures up the mysterious world through which the paddle steamer blithely chugs.

Agatha Christie does not write challenging roles for actors; performances of depth and nuance are not only unnecessary, they would actually sink the whole enterprise by piercing its brittle façade. That said, the actors assembled in the Theatre Three production succeed in carrying off the necessary style; and in some cases they manage to find, if not depths, at least a kind of quirky individuality.

This is especially true for Regan Adair, as the charming newlywed Simon, and Danielle Pickard as the intrusive troublemaker Jacqueline de Severac. Jordan Willis as Smith, a young Socialist (shudder!), rather overdoes the sneering and snarling in the first act, but becomes more interesting and believable as his focus shifts from class outrage to young love. Terry McCracken is perfect as the tyrannical dowager aunt, and Renee Krapff is appropriately sweet and long-suffering as her niece. J. Brent Alford as Canon Pennefather does his best with a role that, combining as it does several different characters in the novel, seems almost schizophrenic as events unfold.

If I seem to be overusing the word 'appropriate,' it's simply that there's little more to be said about a classy production of a shallow play. Believability, dimensional characters, any sense of a deeper meaning or message – not in an Agatha Christie script. What you get is an intricate plot unfolding in a stylish milieu. Even if you already vaguely remember the outlines of the plot – as I did in this case – it's fun to watch it tick along like a reliable watch.

Next up in Theatre Three's World Tour Season is a trip to South Africa and a rare opportunity to experience the classic Maxwell Anderson-Kurt Weill musical "Lost in the Stars," which begins previews May 14th. In the meantime, 2 ½ hours on the paddle steamer Lotus may not expand your awareness of the complex world we live in, but it will allow you to appreciate that even the rich and stylish have problems when they travel.

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MURDER ON THE NILE By Agatha Christie  
Presented by Theatre Three, 2800 Routh Street , Dallas TX .  
Performances through April 26, 2009.

Performance Schedule: Thursdays & Sundays at 7:30 p.m.; Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m.; matinees Saturday and Sunday at 2:30 p.m. Additional performances: Miser's Night Out Sunday, April 19, at 7:30 p.m., all seats \$10; Hooky Matinee Wednesday, April 22, at 2 p.m., all seats \$10. Tickets are \$10 - \$40, available at 214-871-3300 (option #1) or at [www.theatre3dallas.com](http://www.theatre3dallas.com)