

Society : Bartholomew Players
Production : A Murder is Announced
Date : 15th May 2026
Venue : Eynsham Village Hall
District : London District 12

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Show Report

I am grateful to Denise Santilli for inviting me to report on the Bartholomew Players' production of Agatha Christie's "A Murder is Announced". Denise herself was at the door to greet me with my tickets and copies of the programme, while Director Debi Lisburne Diacon was kind enough to find time for a chat before the show.

Dame Agatha died fifty years ago and, remembering her Oxfordshire connections, several local drama groups are marking this anniversary. The murder mystery is a fascinating genre, as it makes very specific demands of the actors. In most plays the performers are focused on the development of character, on giving an insight into the motivations and emotions of whoever they are portraying. While this remains true in a murder mystery, these facets are layered with artifice and deceit. Who has got something to hide? Is that character actually who they claim to be? And where is the greed, or enmity, or jealousy that might have driven one of these people to commit murder?

Of course, much of the fun (if that's quite the right word) in watching a murder mystery is in trying to work out "whodunnit", and much of the fun in staging such a work is in misleading the audience while ensuring that there are sufficient clues for them to reach the correct conclusion. I think both the audience and the company at the Friday night performance had quite a lot of fun. However, this does mean that many of the actors play roles in which a degree of dissembling is required, and so issues such as inconsistent characterisation, usually something to avoid, might actually be necessary. Who amongst this talented company of twelve is actually trying to mislead us, and do they succeed?

Alright, let's start with Miss Marple, played by Liz Hutchinson, as it's a reasonable working hypothesis that she didn't commit the murder. It's a challenge to play a character so ubiquitous in popular culture, who has been portrayed by so many fine actors over the years, but Liz managed to channel many of Miss Marple's key characteristics into an interpretation of the role which was still personal and original. Liz was particularly skilled at engagement, with a penetrating look which could bore right through a suspicious character, or illuminate any attempt to mislead. She also ensured that Miss Marple was suitably courageous, challenging false narratives and defending her deductions. She achieved this through excellent body language – when she stood with her beady eye fixed resolutely on some poor unfortunate you knew that she had an ace to play, probably concealed in her capacious knitting bag – and through decisive delivery of her lines, which were loaded with such logic and certainty that they were impossible to argue with. But Liz's Marple also had a softer, more sympathetic side, which was particularly evident when she was gently questioning Bunny, and at all times her use of gesture was well-judged – sufficient but not excessive.

The Ten Commandments of the Detection Club, helpfully reproduced in the programme, state that the detective must not commit the crime, which probably rules out Inspector Craddock, played by Chris Carson. Craddock's relationship with Miss Marple was suitably conflicted: while he would generally like to be left alone to solve the case, he often has reason to be grateful for her insights. Chris embodied the rural detective – honest, painstaking, pedestrian – and he allowed Inspector Craddock plenty of thinking time, although there was the occasional suspicion that this wasn't Craddock searching for the way forward, but Chris searching for the next line. The measured, thoughtful approach was also evident in Chris's body language – there was plenty of arm-folding and chin-stroking – and he is skilled at projecting bafflement through a range of puzzled expressions. He was also good at suggesting that Craddock knew more than he was letting on: whenever he stated that he had no further questions, you just knew that sooner or later more questions would be asked.

Craddock was assisted by Sergeant Mellors, played by Graeme Surtees. The Sergeant doesn't have much to contribute to the investigation, but happily Graeme proved to be an excellent listener: lurking at the back of the scene, he would look out over the top of his glasses and pay close attention to the account of a witness, before making a careful note in his book with just a flicker of expression. This was an object lesson into how supporting cast members can contribute to the overall quality of a production.

We must now turn our attention to the residents of Little Paddocks, Letitia Blacklock's home in the village of Chipping Cleghorn. Letitia herself, played by Elaine Leggett, appears to be a generous and hospitable lady, supporting her childhood friend Bunny and providing temporary accommodation for relatives Patrick and Julia Simmons. Elaine has excellent stage presence and at the beginning of the play she exudes comfortable confidence, even when her nervous and excitable house guests discover a notice in the local newspaper announcing that a murder will take place at 6.30pm that evening. Letitia brushes their concerns aside, but her previously all-pervasive smile slowly begins to fade. Why is she quite so anxious about what Bunny has to say? Why is she quite so defensive and evasive about little details such as table lamps being swapped over? Elaine skilfully allowed the finger of suspicion to alight on her, and you could see her inner confidence dissolving in her eyes. There was plenty of dynamic and tonal variation in her delivery of her lines, with periods of calm control punctuated by angry or frustrated outbursts as various narrative threads were pursued and resolved. By the end Letitia's gregarious bonhomie was a distant memory, and desperation and panic were written all over Elaine's face as she searched for the way out. I wasn't quite sure why she appeared to be talking to herself at the end, but overall this was a finely judged, beautifully paced and appropriately deceptive development of character

Bunny was played by Louise Taney, and her slightly confused demeanour and very deliberate enunciation had me puzzled for a while, which is of course desirable in a murder mystery. Slowly but surely, Louise pulled her character into focus, the childhood friend of Letitia who knows a bit too much, the gentle but vulnerable lady who one day may let the cat out of the bag. Suddenly Letitia's protective attitude and generosity began to look suspicious. Louise was particularly effective at portraying Bunny's anxiety and confusion, and I was put in mind of the tendency of people living with dementia to remember events from the past rather more clearly than things which have just happened. She projected her character's nervousness and dislike of changed routines very powerfully, and cleverly won the audience's sympathy without ever quite putting herself in the clear.

Imogen Tingle gave a very assured performance as Julia Simmons. Confident and self-possessed, she captured something of the post-war era in her relaxed and mildly entitled demeanour, while her

studiously maintained upper-class accent and clear enunciation meant that every line was invested with persuasive authority. Imogen moves well on stage and uses gestures sparingly, although Julia's relationship with her brother Patrick perhaps lacked the edginess of a classic sibling rivalry. There was a reason for that, of course, and once Julia's true identity had been revealed Imogen was able to add pride and defiance to her character's traits. Ed Miller played Patrick Simmons with airy insouciance, arranging himself on the furniture, thrusting his hands in and out of his pockets and giving insights into his feelings and opinions through an impressive range of facial expressions. He was also able to embody something of the spirit of the times in his optimism and general lack of seriousness, and he shaped his lines well.

Many of the more amusing moments were provided by Elisabetta Filosa as Letitia's housekeeper Mitzi. I say housekeeper, but Mitzi has an extensive list of responsibilities up to and including bottle-washer, and she resents almost all of them. Mitzi is a refugee from Eastern Europe, and Hungarian Language Coach Eva Behari evidently helped Elisabetta to deliver her various observations and complaints with a consistently persuasive accent. Elisabetta is a confident performer, effortlessly finding centre stage to deliver her announcements and denunciations, and while many of these were delivered with an extravagant theatrical flourish, they seemed entirely in keeping with her somewhat flamboyant character and clearly went down well with the audience. Mitzi ultimately proves to have a darker side, but her muttered threats and crude attempts at blackmail were seen off quite readily.

Steph Hibberd, playing Phillipa Haymes, struck an appropriately neutral tone as a houseguest whose presence wasn't readily explained, although her accent certainly hinted at an upper-class background. As the plot thickened and more and more names swirled around in the backstories of the key protagonists, the true identity of Phillipa became ever more mysterious. And who was Mrs Swettenham, played by Angela Cohen? She was portrayed as harmless enough, a curious lady with time on her hands, but she seemed to keep turning up at Little Paddocks just in time for something terrible to happen. She was accompanied by her son Edmund, played by Jack Herbert, a character prone to explosive outbursts, generally aimed at the forces of law and order and not always totally convincing. Which (if any) of these characters were central to the plot, and who was merely caught up in the narrative? A strength of the production was that it became increasingly difficult to tell.

Luke Frewin played Rudi Scherz, whose significance only becomes apparent after he has been shot just a few seconds after making his first appearance. All I can say is that Luke played dead pretty convincingly and he seemed to be a pleasant enough young man when he came on for his curtain call much later in the evening.

The production certainly looked a picture, and once the house lights had dimmed the tabs hurtled back to reveal a solidly constructed box set packed with period detail. For once the wide but shallow stage in Eynsham Village Hall was an advantage, as Keith Pimm and Martin Berry's set design comprised two adjacent rooms that had been knocked together, with a prominent support column in the middle of the upstage wall and access doors to either side. One of these is supposedly redundant ... but both doors proved to be equipped with well-finished returns. Nonetheless, most entrances and exits were through a single door, which was restricting at times. There was also a tiny bit of wobble when this door was closed, but this was only apparent because the lights reflected off the glazed prints on the walls. Those walls sported picture rails and dado rails, with contrasting paintwork and contoured panels below the dado rail. There was a convincing fireplace complete with a polished fireguard stage left, and the mantelpiece bore a range of ornaments together with a clock absolutely typical of the era.; the stage right wall featured a window hung with curtains and equipped with a window seat.

This impressive and practical set was elevated by the quality of the set dressing. The Queen Anne style winged arm chairs were complemented by various cabinets, dressers and occasional tables broadly typical of the post-war years, together with details such as a metal magazine rack and a vintage telephone. The most impressive aspect of Catherine Bailey and Linda Berry's properties was the depth of detail: the bookshelf sported a comprehensive assortment of books, there were ornaments and houseplants everywhere you looked, and the drinks cabinet housed an array of glasses and decanters, with the company provided with convincing liquid refreshment as necessary. There was also coffee in the pot and milk in the jug, although the "Delicious Death" chocolate cake was relatively modest in its ambition. The fine detailing extended into more personal properties: the silver cigarette case, the bottle of medication, the Police Sergeant's notebook, the copies of the local paper. Alright, most local papers were broadsheet back then and these reproductions assuredly weren't that, but let's not get too picky as overall the staging was really impressive.

One further detail which added tremendously to the set was the amount of practical light on stage. There were wall lights and occasional lights which switched on at exactly the right moments and lent the evening scenes a warm domestic glow. Les Allen's lighting design differentiated effectively between different times of day, and featured a few theatrical touches, such as the light lingering on whoever had the last word in a scene, and a spotlight sweeping the stage during scene changes as the crew made a few adjustments, such as ensuring that the mantelpiece clock was showing the correct time. It didn't quite match up to the recorded chimes, but certainly these were authentic to that distinctive style of clock. Suzie Chadwick's sound design included some suitable music – a bit of jazz for before the show and during the interval, and some highly atmospheric musical excerpts to maintain suspense during the scene changes.

Wardrobe Mistress Judy Pimm and her team did a great job with the costumes, which reinforced the early 50s period feel and aided the performers in their characterisations. Most if not all of the characters had at least one change of costume, in keeping with a drama set over several days. The Simmons siblings in particular were provided with some striking outfits, and the period styling extended to details such as the cut of the trousers, the seams on the stockings, the design of the performers' (occasionally oversized) shoes and the Inspector's tie-clip. This attention to detail was also evident in Sue Greenwood's work on hair, and one nice touch I particularly noted was Patrick's razor-sharp parting.

The broad stage was able to comfortably accommodate the company of twelve and there weren't any particular issues with sight lines, but the blocking was occasionally problematic. It's in the nature of Agatha Christie's works that there are scenes in which the whole ensemble gathers in the drawing room or wherever, and the interactions between the characters can complicate matters. For example, at one point Julia walked behind somebody to look over their shoulder to read the newspaper, which looked very unnatural, but was necessitated by what happened immediately afterwards. Similarly, characters invited to sit down would sometimes eschew the comfortable armchair centre stage to perch on the window seat, simply because they wouldn't be involved again in the scene for a while. Such irritations are difficult to eliminate with so many performers in a narrow space.

Body language was generally good, with most of the cast using gestures judiciously to add emphasis when necessary. As ever, characters were often at their most convincing when given something to do, such as reading a copy of The Gazette or even "smoking" a cigarette. It was all quite mannered, in keeping with the period setting, but this extended to the dialogue which occasionally resembled a

recitation rather than a natural exchange of observations and opinions; some pronouncements might have been better delivered as asides, as this would have introduced more variation in pace and tone.

I think the key here is in the gaps between the lines: cues should generally be picked up promptly, but an ellipsis here or a slight pause for reflection there introduces variation in rhythm which helps dialogue to sound much more natural and convincing. This was certainly the case on the odd occasions when a character became more aerated, when there was a noticeable uptick in pace and energy; and there was a bit of ensemble chatter in the third scene of the first act. The company generally knew their lines well, but there were some obvious moments of uncertainty which had a disproportionate impact and which tended to sap the energy out of an exchange. There were also instances of performers adjusting what they were saying as the exact text came back to them, and while I am all in favour of accuracy there were times when it might have been better to stick with the paraphrase. It's the difference between knowing your lines and really knowing your lines so you no longer have to think about them, although I know from personal experience that anyone can be tripped up at any time.

Director Debi Lisburne Diacon had clearly worked hard on characterisation with her talented cast, and for the most part they found the sweet spot for a murder mystery: persuasive characters shot through with enough mystery and ambiguity to hold the audience's attention and engage them in trying to resolve the plot: "Whodunnit", in fact. I was certainly caught up in the whole thing, and just knew that those pearls had to be significant, even if I didn't know why or how. The show apparently sold out in advance, and the enduring appeal of Agatha Christie's work, coupled with the Bartholomew Players' many qualities and impressively high standards of production, means that this fact at least is relatively straightforward to explain.

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