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A sellout is announced - deft detective drama, superbly staged

It seems the Agatha Christie aficionados will be heading to Eynsham in droves this week, as every seat is already sold. They won't be disappointed. Bartholomew Players have upped their game yet again, and Monday's performance was the slickest dress rehearsal I have witnessed yet from this supposedly amateur dramatic society.

The scenario of *A Murder is Announced*, in brief: residents of Chipping Cleghorn are perturbed and puzzled by the advance announcement in the local gazette of a murder, scheduled to take place at 6.30pm in the home of Letitia Blacklock (Elaine Leggett). Can this be a joke? Who on earth could want to harm an apparently warm, generous woman, or any of the assortment of needy individuals she has kindly taken under her wing? The very idea attracts a variety of curious neighbours to the house at that time; so when events take an unexpected turn there are plenty of witnesses and plenty of suspects, and the audience can get fully involved in the glorious I-Spy game of identifying possible motives and methods, helped along by Miss Marple (Liz Hutchinson) and Inspector Craddock (Chris Carson). What's not to like? No wonder it's a sellout!

One can see in the performances, and in Debi Lisburne Diacon's direction, the enduring legacy of Laurence Marks, the group's patron, who devoted hours to workshopping characters' back stories when he directed their production of *A Pack of Lies* in 2023. Elaine Leggett's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as she discussed her character's history in depth after the show.

It seems wrong to pick out individuals for mention, as every character in the cast was fully fleshed out and engaging. There were no weak links in the cast, and interactions between them were fizzing with chemistry. Among them were some really memorable, stand-out performances. Elaine Leggett excelled as Letitia Blacklock, with a succession of teasingly contradictory facial expressions increasingly flickering across her face as the story progressed. Liz Hutchinson was born to play Miss Marple, with her quizzical long hard stare erupting transiently into elfin playfulness, as she sparked off Chris Carson's masterly Inspector. And Elisabetta Filosa was hilariously unforgettable as the histrionic Hungarian maid. As usual, the stagecraft is truly professional. No effort has been spared to reproduce the scene with historical accuracy, from the seams running down the back of the ladies' stockings to vintage furniture bought at auction and painstakingly re-stained and re-upholstered. I would trust the Bartholomew Players to renovate my house more than many a builder - the sturdy set withstands the most furiously slammed doors and is beautifully decorated.

The all-important scene changes were delightfully managed. The atmospheric and intriguing use of focused spotlight roving around the dark room was accompanied by an inspired choice of music (Suzie Chadwick), effectively distracting attention from deft rearrangement of items in the room.

Even the programme design deserves a prize! From the beautiful, authentic railway-poster cover, to the illuminating and entertaining content (including a recipe for “Delicious Death” and the Ten Commandments of the Detection Club of which Agatha Christie was a member), it was itself a souvenir to treasure.

The next Bartholomew Players production in November, *Plaza Suite*, will again be directed by one of their patrons, Laurence Marks (of *Birds of a Feather* fame) - if you want to see it, better make sure to book your tickets early!