

Otterbein brews plot of 'Coffee'

By Michael Grossberg

Dispatch Theater Critic

Nobody does old-fashioned mysteries better than Otterbein Summer Theatre, which traditionally offers a whodunit every August.

For the finale of its enjoyable, 30th anniversary season, Otterbein has chosen one of Agatha Christie's lesser-known murder mysteries.

Black Coffee, which opened last night to a delighted, sold-out crowd, is a nifty whodunit set in 1928 at Sir Claud Amory's posh country home near London.

Director John Stefano brushes off most specks of dust from this minor 1930 period piece, which gets off to a slow start before kicking into gear soon after Amory's death. Who poisoned his black coffee — and why?

There is no doubt that Hercule Poirot will find the answer — or that Ed Vaughan's stirring performance is the best reason to taste this *Coffee*.

His dashing entrance sparked a burst of applause last night from Otterbein regulars, who have come to appreciate the charms of this entertaining actor.

European charm and a hungry intelligence are the *leitmotifs* of Vaughan's star turn. Even throwaway dialogue — a simple "I see" — provokes laughter.

Vaughan is reprising one of his most important roles. His Poirot was the first guest professional performance at Players Theatre, which presented *Black Coffee* in 1987. Over the decade since, Vaughan has lost some excess poundage, while gaining enough additional expertise and subtlety of manner to be even more persuasive as the portly Belgian detective.

Vaughan exudes palpable delight and an amusingly arrogant confidence in exercising his powers of observation, deduction and cat-and-mouse deception.

The clues may be minimal — a dropped key, disappearing coffee cups, a stolen bomb formula, the "noise of tearing silk" — but they provide the key for the

THEATER REVIEW

Black Coffee, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Agatha Christie's mystery. Directed by John Stefano.

Hercule Poirot Ed Vaughan
Miss Amory Victoria Libertore
Richard Amory Corey Brill
Lucia Amory Emily Cotton

Otterbein "poirs" creamy whodunit with stirring Poirot

Being presented at 8 tonight through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through Aug. 11 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$10-\$14. Call 823-1109.

perspicacious Poirot. There is a method to his mania, but it is his mania for neatness that guides Poirot's "little gray cells" to the final clue.

Supported by a solid cast and a top-notch design team, Vaughan makes Christie's formula fresh again.

Emily Marie Cotton is vulnerable and valiant as Lucia Amory, the initial suspect, while Corey Brill fits the bill of a true British gentleman as her husband.

Also stirred into the creamy confection are Cara Miller's Hollywood-glamorous Barbara Amory, Steven Lhamon's shady Dr. Carelli, Jason Morrisette's polite Captain, and Christopher DePaola's proper butler.

The handsome production boasts a wood paneled library-den by scenic designer Madeleine Sobota and smart costumes by Janice Benning, with the burnished period glow enhanced by D. Glen Vanderbilt's lighting.

"I think I play my part rather well," Poirot says with smug satisfaction after the third-act twist.

That, he does. So does Vaughan and the rest of the 13-member ensemble. One of central Ohio's leading actors has returned to one of his best roles in triumph.

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

'Black Coffee' concludes summer season

By JULANNE HOHBACH

News & Public Opinion Reporter

Audiences will be pouring into the Campus Center Theatre next week to get their fill of *Black Coffee*, Otterbein Summer Theatre's last production of the season.

The college will present the 1934 Agatha Christie work July 31-Aug. 11. The little-known murder mystery promises to keep audiences busy with red herring plots surrounding the real killer, which convince the audience that every character could have done it.

Physicist Sir Claude Amory has created a formu-

■ Otterbein's production of Agatha Christie's *Black Coffee* will be presented July 31-Aug. 11 at the Westerville college's Campus Center Theater, 100 W. Home St. Tickets can be reserved by calling 823-1109.

la for an atom bomb when he dies from poisoned coffee. His devoted family, secretary, butler and an Italian visitor all had motives to plot his death. It turns out his family is not quite as devoted as he thought — most needed his money and formula for the explosive. A blackmailer also enters the picture.

It is up to Christie's infamous Hercule Poirot, played by Equity actor Ed Vaughn, to find out whodunnit. Vaughn played Poirot in this work at Players Theater many years ago, said Director John Stefano, so the role is a reprise for him. The 13-member cast also includes French professor James Carr as the owner of the mansion where Amory is killed.

Stefano said this is the first production of *Black Coffee* for Otterbein, though the college has done other Christie works. Summer audiences are different than those for the regular season, he said, and they always enjoy mysteries.

In an Otterbein tradition, audience members will get a chance at the second intermission to guess whodunnit for themselves. Those who guess correctly will be entered in a random drawing for a small prize.

Black Coffee runs at the Campus Center Theatre,

100 W. Home St., July 31-Aug. 4 and Aug. 7-11. The opening night performance will begin at 7:30 p.m. Sun-

day matinees are at 2 p.m., all other shows start at 8 p.m.

Tickets are \$10 for Sunday matinees and opening night, \$12 for Wednesday and Thursday and \$14 for Friday and Saturday. To reserve tickets, call the Otterbein Summer Theatre box office at 823-1109 weekdays from 1-8:30 p.m.

ARTS BRIEFS

Country western dance to be held

A country western dance will be held Friday at the Aladdin Shrine Temple, 3850 Stelzer Road.

Two-step, waltz, line and partner dances will be included. Cost is \$5 per person.

Lessons will be held at 8 p.m., followed by continuous dance music from 9 p.m. to midnight.

For more information call 476-5545.

Summer season closes in mystery

The Otterbein Summer Theatre 30th anniversary season ends with the Agatha Christie mystery *Black Coffee* being presented July 31 through Aug. 11 in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St.

The play will be directed by John Stefano.

Opening night performance will begin at 7:30 p.m., Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. and all other performances at 8 p.m.

Tickets are \$10 for Sunday matinees and opening night, \$12 for Wednesday and Thursday and \$14 for Friday and Saturday. To reserve tickets call 823-1109.

College library offers antique dolls

Antique dolls owned by Westerville resident Shirley Wygle will be on display through Sept. 6 at Otterbein College's Courtright Memorial Library, 138 W. Main St.

The exhibit also includes doll house dolls, doll furniture and toys and magazines on doll collecting.

For more information call Mary Ellen Armentrout at 823-1164.

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A stiff mug of mystery

Otterbein brews Christie's 'Black Coffee'

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BY JAY WEITZ

"Myself, I think I play my part well," crows Hercule Poirot in his slightly tortured English near the end of *Black Coffee*. Agatha Christie's Belgian detective has just solved a sticky little murder by, in effect, staging his own little play within the play, and has every reason to be proud.

Ed Vaughan has equal reason to crow. He has just brought Poirot to fastidious life on the Otterbein Campus Center stage. Every two-fingered tap of his temple, every thoughtful pause, every simple phrase contributes to an exacting and delightful characterization.

Otterbein College brings down the

curtain on its 30th summer season with a hefty mug of its title beverage. *Black Coffee*, nimbly directed by theater and dance department chair John Stefano, also boasts a strong supporting cast that casts a bit of suspicion on virtually everybody in the play.

The enigmatic Italian Dr. Carelli (Steven Lhamon) knows his poisons and may also know more about Lucia Amory (Emily Marie Cotton) than he's letting on. Her husband Richard (Corey Brill) could have knocked off his father Sir Claud Amory (James Carr) for the money. Perhaps the victim's sister Caroline (Victoria Libertore) is slightly too talkative, his secretary Edward Raynor (Aaron Ramey) a mite too solicitous, or his butler

Tredwell (Christopher DePaola) a bit too eager to gossip. And exactly why is Sir Claud's voluptuous niece Barbara (Cara Miller) doing her best to further distract Poirot's already sufficiently distracted sidekick, Captain Hastings (Jason Morrisette)?

Christie throws in enough red herrings for a seafood buffet.

It all plays out against the luxurious backdrop of scenic designer Madeleine Sobota's sculpted mantle and wood-shelved library.

"Symmetry is everything," Poirot observes in Act Two, offering simultaneous glimpses into Christie's method, the detective's psyche, and the mystery's denouement. He's wrong, however. Good acting, strong directing, and intelligent design also play their parts. And like Poirot himself, Otterbein plays them well. **CG**

Agatha Christie's *Black Coffee* continues August 7-10 at 8 p.m. and August 11 at 2 p.m., in Otterbein's Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville. Call 823-1109.