

Otterbein's 'Mousetrap' recovers after a rough start

By DENNIS THOMPSON

Suburban News Theater Critic

Otterbein Summer Theatre opens its summer season with a classic murder mystery, Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*.

The play is probably best known for the astounding length of its continuous run on the London stage. It has now been playing on London's West End for more than 45 years.

Mollie and Giles Ralston are a young married couple opening their new guest

house, the castle-like Monkswell Manor, during a tremendous snow storm.

Their first guests include Christopher Wren, a young architect; the unpleasant Mrs. Boyle; Maj. Metcalf, a retired army officer; the rough-hewn Miss Casewell, and the mysterious stranger, Mr. Paravicini.

A Sgt. Trotter soon arrives from the local police force warning the inhabitants of the manor might be in danger.

The guests, at first, scoff at such thoughts until they

find there is reason for concern just as the storm cuts them off from the outside world.

The early moments of the opening night performance were out of sync.

Director Doreen Dunn seemed leery of having the actors just stand and talk, speeches of any length were accompanied by seemingly random roaming of the stage.

Many of the student actors were trying too hard to come off as eccentric.

But soon most of the actors settled down, the exposition was dispensed and the production found its rhythm just as the mystery began to intensify.

The strongest performances are turned in by Amber Mellot as Mollie Ralston and Randy Goetz as Trotter.

There is no remarkable aspect of Mellot's performance. Mollie is basically a straight-up-front character. But from the young wife in love, to tentative hostess of strangers, to frightened suspicious woman, she yields the most consistent sense of self.

Goetz' Trotter is cool, collected and professional with darting eyes indicating noth-

ing is missed in his inquiring gaze.

With husky voice and assured swagger, Kelly Reeves gives a fine physical performance as the rough-edged Miss Casewell.

Also solid are Jared Jensen as the protective husband Giles Ralston and Brent Tomer as Metcalf, although he is given the least amount to work with.

Loud and cackling at first, Jesse Wilson initially seems to be trying too hard to be eccentric as Wren.

He soon settles down to become an audience favorite by maintaining a youthful odd exuberance while attempting to mask emotional turmoil.

Less successful are Meg Morman who tries too hard to be nasty as Boyle and ends up playing an attitude, and Josh Gilliam who tries equally hard to be mysterious as Paravicini and remains essentially a caricature.

As always, Rob Johnson adds significantly to the atmosphere with a handsome dark wood set design of the great hall.

Otterbein Summer Theatre's *The Mousetrap* continues at 8 p.m. today and Thursday and 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday, 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday through July 12. There are no performances July 3 and 4. Performances are at

the Campus Center Theatre, Sun., \$15 Thurs. and Fri. and 100 W. Home St., Westerville. \$16 Sat. For more information call 823-1109. Tickets are \$14 Wed. and



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THEATER REVIEW

The Mousetrap, Otterbein Summer Theatre's student production of Agatha Christie's mystery. Directed by Doreen Dunn.

Mollie Ralston Amber Mellott
Giles Ralston Jared Jensen
Major Metcalf Brent Tomer
Mrs. Boyle Meg Morman

Trapped again, and willingly

Being performed at 8 tonight and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday — through July 12 — in the Campus Center Theatre, 100 W. Home St., Westerville.

Tickets cost \$14-\$16. Call 614-823-1109.

You'll get caught in this 'Trap'

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

I can't remember how many times I've seen *The Mousetrap*. Yet, every time I see Agatha Christie's well-contrived mystery-thriller done well, I get so caught up in the British characters and their conceivable motives that I forget whodunit.

Otterbein Summer Theatre, which traditionally ends its season with a mystery, launched its 37th season last night with an extremely well-done *Mousetrap*. It certainly fooled me: Not only did I fail to guess the murderer — and to make the evening even more fun, the college is awarding a nightly prize to a theater-goer who guesses the murderer at intermission — but I also failed to anticipate the first victim.

Although central Ohio has seen its share of *Mousetraps* in the 1990s, Otterbein hasn't revived it since 1973. The trick in Agatha Christie is to play it straight, in clipped British character and in period. Otterbein has mastered that trick, and the fine student cast helps even seasoned theater-goers see the play afresh.

The student actors are so good they often made me forget I was watching young adults in the older roles. As Mollie and Giles Ralston, a loving couple who share duties maintaining Monkswell Manor, Amber Mellott and Jared Jensen display a convincing romantic chemistry and an ardent sincerity that heightened the sense of imminent danger.

As Miss Casewell, Kelly Reeves makes a strong case for context and nuance. Her character, smart and aloof with a carefully restrained rage, clearly has a history.

Christie balanced suspense with humor, and much of this production's humor comes from Jesse Wilson's eccentric, manic Christopher Wren. Josh Gilliam plays the suspicious, heavily accented Mr. Paravini, who arrives unexpectedly, without luggage and possibly in disguise.

Solid support comes from Meg Norman's forbidding, glaring Mrs. Boyle; Brent Tomer's jolly-old-school Major Metcalf; and Randy Goetz's dedicated Detective Trotter.

Rob Johnson's country-mansion set is up to his usual high standards, with a flickering fireplace, dark wooden panels and textured furniture bearing the weight of history and social propriety.

Otterbein's handsome, persuasive production, well-paced with pleasing nuances by director Doreen Dunn, reminds us why the play has become a staple. Not only are the characters interesting and plausible, but the play probes psychology against a post-war context of social dislocation and divided families.

Perhaps that's why *The Mousetrap* has become the longest running play in history. It opened in London's West End in 1952, and it's still going strong almost half a century later. No critic should reveal the mysterious murderer(s), but I can predict Otterbein will make a killing at the box office.

■ Friday, June 26, 1998