

# REP's excellent 'Mousetrap' keeps audience guessing



Elizabeth Heflin as Mollie and Lee Ernst as Mr. Paravicini. COURTESY OF PAUL CERRO

**By Gail Obenreder**

Special to The News Journal

Most everyone knows Agatha Christie's iconic mystery novels – she wrote 79 in all – many featuring her famous sleuths Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot.

But Dame Agatha also wrote over a dozen plays. Historically, she's one of the most successful playwrights (perhaps even more than Shakespeare), and "The Mousetrap" is considered one of her best stage works.

This classic murder mystery is partly an affectionate send-up of the very icons the playwright helped to create: the locked-room mystery, with characters right out of a game of Clue, including the keen detective gathering the suspects together in the main salon

of an old manor house with closed doors and back staircases and the howling wind. It has all the components of what could be a creaky melodrama.

And yet by the end of the play, director Steve Tague and the spot-on cast at the University of Delaware's Resident Ensemble Players (REP) had the sold-out audience in the palm of their collective hands. People were actually leaning forward in their seats and whispering guesses to one another. What fun!

Creating the physical atmosphere is critical in staging a work of this genre. The set, lights, costumes and sound have to carry many messages without either overstepping the dramatic conventions or taking the verve out of the players' work. Here, the stagecraft is

perfectly balanced.

On entering, the audience is practically enveloped by the Great Hall at Monkswell Manor. The proscenium seems to have been widened for C. David Russell's soaring set, with a huge, elegant window center stage that sets the tone almost as vividly as the room itself. Snow is falling outside the great window – and because there was actually snow falling outside the theatre, the audience was part of the setting from the start.

Eileen Smitheimer's elegant sound design never tipped over into the mawkish – moans and creaks and sighs kept creeping in and out, cleverly on the right side of aural expectations.

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# REP: Eight players in production

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Lighting by Matt Richards was spooky without being silly, with a perfect sense of comment on theatrical conventions – and the Act II opening light sequence had a classical elegance that somehow merged right into the action.

The director has to have a sure yet relaxed hand on this kind of production, so that it moves swiftly but doesn't leave anyone in the audience behind. Director Steve Tague (a gifted REP actor as well) skillfully walks the directorial tightrope between whimsy and action, giving his players freedom to create vivid characters yet keeping them all on the same train.

An ensemble show like this – all characters clearly defined with almost equal stage time – is a perfect match for the REP.

The eight players include some beloved Christie characters: naïve guest house owners Mollie and Giles Ralston (Elizabeth Heflin and Mic Matarrese); the flamboyantly lovable young architect Christopher Wren (guest artist Jeffrey C. Hawkins); a doyenne of better days, Mrs. Boyle (Kathleen Pirkel Tague); stiff-upper-

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap"

**WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Feb. 6, 7 and 8; 2 p.m. Saturday and Feb. 8 and 9.

**WHERE:** Thompson Theatre, Roselle Center for the Arts, 110 Orchard Road, Newark

**TICKETS:** \$22-\$28

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:** (302) 831-2204; [www.rep.udel.edu](http://www.rep.udel.edu)

lipped Major Metcalf (Stephen Pelinski); Miss Casewell, a liberated young woman (Deena Burke); the mysterious foreigner Mr. Paravicini (Lee Ernst); and the ever-necessary Detective

Sergeant Trotter (Michael Gotch). It's just not possible to single out any one of these actors – wearing iconic 50s clothing also by C. David Russell – because the performances, abetted by the playwright's skill, are so well-balanced.

What else can you say about a play that's been running since 1952 in London? (That's 62 years and over 25,000 performances, if you like statistics.) Well, you can say, "Go see it and have a great time." The audience is always sworn to secrecy at the end of the performance, so if you want to know who did it – and it's not the butler; there is none – get thee to the REP!

Gail Oberreder is an arts professional, writer and producer from Wilmington.

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