

BEST-SELLING DEATH

AMERICA'S LONGEST-RUNNING PLAY OFFERS A FEEL-GOOD NIGHT OF ENTERTAINMENT WHICH, OF COURSE, BEGINS WITH A MURDER.

AGATHA CHRISTIE'S classic whodunit *The Mousetrap* is the world's longest-running play with 60 years and over 26,000 performances to its credit. In the US, the longest-running play is also a fun-filled murder mystery although, with a mere 26 years and 12,000 performances, *Shear Madness* has some catching up to do.

Having recently played Boston and Washington, this popular and award-winning production, that the *Huffington Post* calls "Consistently entertaining and often downright hilarious" is currently playing Off-Broadway at New York's Davenport Theatre.

Set in a unisex hair salon, the plot follows a fairly typical murder mystery format. There's a dead body – in this case, the Salon's unseen landlady – and a cast of would-be murderers including a stiff antiques dealer, a snooty socialite, a camp hairdresser and his wise-cracking assistant.

The production design is cartoony and colourful, rivalling the vibrant sets of *Hairspray*; the comic clichés and set jokes are reminiscent of the *Carry On* films of the '60s. Cutting-edge or avant-garde this is not, and if it reminds some audiences of the lowbrow fun of dinner theatre, well, that's where its stage life began.

The text was adapted from the 1963 play *Scherenschnitte* (Shearing Cuts) by German playwright Paul Portner and debuted at a dinner theatre in Lake George, New York 38 years ago before transitioning to "legitimate theatre". Its original producers Marilyn Abrams and Bruce Jordan are still very much involved, with Abrams having played roles herself, while Jordan continues to direct.

The dinner theatre origins of *Shear Madness* can still be felt in contemporary productions,



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which, after the first act, invite the audience to become involved in solving the crime. Eventually the audience gets to vote on who they think the murderer is. This, in-turn, leads to a dramatic finale and, given the interaction and improvisation, each show winds up ending differently. A good whodunit always has a twist, right?

That *Shear Madness* and *The Mousetrap* endure on the stage is witness to our culture's overall fascination with crime, and murder in particular. Whether it's a grisly Hollywood retelling of serial killer story, an integral documentary like Netflix' *Making A Murderer*, teen-drama *How To Get Away With Murder*, the comfortable Englishness of *Midsomer Murders* or the mannered hilarity of *Gosford Park* the whodunit invites an interactive reading. Who, literally, done it? Exposed character

back stories, motives, alibies and the final reveal offer audiences both an intriguing engagement and a satisfying resolve.

It goes almost without saying that critics are less than enthusiastic when it comes to this kind of populist fare. Clichéd and corny are some of the kinder criticisms, but it is what it is and 11 million bums on seats so far must make the producers happier than a positive review.

Actors also love it. Perhaps its high camp hijinks are relief from more intense roles. The current cast includes Jordan Ahnquist (*Hamlet*) as Tony the stylist, Priscilla Flowers (*Spamalot*) as assistant Barbara, Gil Brady (*Boeing, Boeing*) as the suited-up Eddie, Lisa McMillan (*Gypsy*) as Mrs Shubert, with Patrick Noonan (*Orange Is The New Black*) and Jonathan Randell Silver (*Royal Pains*) as the detectives.

If you go along to this production, be warned: the action begins before the curtain goes up. Keep an eagle-eye for details and clues. You may be called upon to play detective.

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