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Review: CBT's 'Murder on the Orient Express' Enjoys a Sensational Second Trip

The show must go on, even when Covid deals out nasty surprises. Clarence Brown Theatre opened a snazzy production of Ken Ludwig's stage adaptation of *Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express* last September, only to be forced to close it several days later due to a Covid outbreak in the cast. Not only did the closure disappoint the CBT audience and ticket-holders, it was a blow to the actors, creative staff, and crew who lost a performance opportunity. Perhaps magnifying this disappointment was the fact that this had turned out to be a real first class production that was beautifully entertaining—dramatically, visually, and atmospherically.



photo by Ella Marston

Thankfully, the Clarence Brown Theatre management decided to bring the production back for a second go this month—a decision made solid by a fully returning cast and atmospheric set ready to go. Having seen and reviewed last year's production, I can say without hesitation that this year's one is equally compelling and exciting, with everyone in the cast able to revisit and subtly re-punctuate their roles.

Although one may be familiar with the Christie novel featuring the recurring character of Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, or the number of film adaptations, Ludwig's adaptation of the novel is deceptively successful in its ability to remain true to the original storytelling while removing a few extraneous characters, setting priorities for the main characters, and creating a streamlined plot. Director John Sipes has taken Ludwig's script and applied an energetic physical pacing that uses crisp dialog delivery and D.J. Pike's inventive and elegant set of moving wagons, flying pieces, and background projections.

The plot, of course, is the classic murder mystery, with all the delicious Agatha Christie details of place and time. Poirot (Armando Durán), having finished a difficult case in Syria, has stopped in Istanbul for a little rest and relaxation. Finding that he is called back to London, he seeks to book a compartment on the famous Orient Express. Strangely, the train's first class compartments are all booked, despite it being the off-season. Fortunately, he encounters an old friend, Monsieur Bouc (John Pribyl), the head of the railway company, who offers him his personal compartment. In the meantime, Poirot has encountered an odd assortment of fellow passengers, intriguing and baffling the esteemed detective with their unlikely diverse backgrounds and personalities.

Mrs. Helen Hubbard (Katie Cunningham) is the quintessential loud and unrestrained American from Minnesota, having made a career of marrying older wealthy gentlemen. In contrast, there is the elderly, exiled Russian Princess Natalya Dragomiroff (Carol Mayo Jenkins), assisted in travel by the Swedish Greta Ohlsson (Rachel Darden). A young woman, Mary Debenham (Rachael Allion) has an apparent

lover, Colonel Arbuthnot (David Brian Alley). Then there is the former doctor and present Hungarian royalty, Countess Andrenyi (Christine Sage). Even the train conductor Michel (Guthrie Butler) seems tense. Christie's villain is the obnoxious and aggressive American "businessman" Samuel Ratchett (Jed Diamond) traveling with his personal secretary Hector MacQueen (Michael Najman). The passengers soon find themselves expressing shock and presenting alibis when Ratchett is found stabbed in his own bed and with the compartment locked from the inside. With the train halted by a snowstorm, its tracks blocked by snow drifts, it falls—of course—to Poirot to solve the murder before the local authorities arrive. In true murder mystery fashion, nothing is what it seems to be.

Durán's Poirot is a masterclass in character construction, consisting of copious amounts of ego and attitude that serves as dramatic glue for the production. Prominent, too, with bearing and gravity is Carol Mayo Jenkins as Princess Dragomiroff. Katie Cunningham is, once again, marvelous as Helen Hubbard—and so successful at Upper Midwest comic diversion that her reveal comes as a major shock. John Pribyl was masterful as the harumphing Monsieur Bouc, the necessary side-character in every murder mystery. Christine Sage used a delicious Hungarian accent to set up her strong-willed Countess Andrenyi.

Yet another essential character here is the production's atmosphere and environment. DJ Pike's marvelously detailed set and projections were revealed mysteriously with CBT's Kenton Yeager recreating Joshua Mullady's original lighting plot. M.J. Hromek's costumes were a feast of period textures and details that seemed a natural extension and enhancement of the set itself. Joe Payne's music and sound ran the dramatic gamut from expressive effects to almost subliminal emphasis of dramatic moments.

Murder on the Orient Express at Clarence Brown Theatre continues its run through September 24, some days excluded.



Armando Durán as Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* – Photo: Ella Marston