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Review: Clarence Brown Theatre's 'Murder on the Orient Express' brings rousing retelling of acclaimed mystery



As the 2023 school year begins to chug along, the Clarence Brown Theatre is getting started on its own new season of performances for the semester. Their first venture, "Murder on the Orient Express", brings Agatha Christie's classic novel to the stage along with her most notable detective, Hercule Poirot.

The first week of its run at Clarence Brown, there's a lot of excitement for students and thespians, returning to the theater with a production as notable and exciting as this. What better way to prepare for the unpredictability of college than with a good ole fashioned whodunit to keep you on your toes?

The play, based on the 1934 novel penned by Christie, was only first brought to the stage as recently as 2017 by playwright Ken Ludwig. The version of this murder mystery we're given is one that remains loyal to its source material in performance, setting, production and overall encapsulation.

Our story begins in Istanbul, Turkey, before departing with the Orient Express on a venture across Europe with an exceptionally eclectic list of passengers. Amongst them is world famous detective Poirot.

After being summoned back to London, England, Poirot boards our ill-fated train with the help of friend and fellow countryman Monsieur Bouc. After one of the passengers is murdered, mystery and hostility ring through the cabin walls as everyone aboard begins to show reasons for suspicion. Our snowy stage is set, and all that's left is to sit and point fingers on a journey stuck in a blizzard in Eastern Europe.

As we're thrust through this frosty mountainside, a projection of continuous snowfall berates the background of the changing set, giving the illusion of feeling and being trapped alongside this suspiciously diverse cast of characters. Paired with an already naturally claustrophobic setting and tensions within seem to swell as fast as the Orient skates through this winter wilderness.

All the more sinister is how illustrious this backdrop remains throughout its 130-minute runtime. Marble columns, dazzling chandeliers and mahogany surfaces on everything paint this period piece in a wickedly bright light. In all its elegance, the Orient Express itself only goes to accentuate the horrors in its cargo.

The carriers of the Orient's immensely heavy baggage are a sight to behold themselves as well. Our protagonist, Poirot, seems to command the train as if he were its conductor. This booming Belgian – here played by Armando Duràn – is a star in his own right with a reputation that precedes him — one almost as prominent as his mustache.

Other highlights include Katie Cunningham's Minnesotan, Mrs. Hubbard, whose hysterics and lovable American obnoxiousness sell her performance in more ways than one. The more cultural toes are stepped on by Hubbard the more the audience seems to respond to her. The Russian Princess Dragomiroff, here played by Carol Mayo Jenkins, brings a commanding presence to the stage both in her convictions and swift verbal punches throughout the evening.

And, of course, John Pribyl's Monsieur Blanc, acting as our detective's sidekick, and the audience's point of relation brings some sense of reality to an otherwise fantastically set narrative. If the culprit is hiding in one of these cabins, strong alibis and devout cluelessness will only shield these passengers for a time before the truth is sniffed out of someone's luggage.

Amidst an ensemble that bounces off each other with ease, the Orient moves our plot along at a steady pace even when much of its extremities come off as slightly more archaic than they probably did back in 1934. Poirot, a beacon of justice, takes a moment right as the curtains initially rise to cite this case as his most difficult.

Cut to our eventual reveal, and it's not hard to see why. Traditionally a character of upstanding morality, Duràn approaches the character with that same sense of tenacity for the law that almost has a new sense of relevance in 2023.

When confronted with his final dilemma, the line of innocence and guilt becomes more squiggly than Poirot would want to believe. As dated as Christie's novel may be, the story of men searching for meaning in a world of evil and chaos through the swift hammer of justice is as important now as it was when the Orient Express first embarked 89 years ago.

Clarence Brown's "Murder on the Orient Express" ultimately brings a rousing retelling of one of the finest mysteries in modern literature right here to Knoxville. Sweeping, eerie sets inhabited by performances that burst with flavor bring the world of Agatha Christie billowing onto the stage in eminent fashion. You don't need to visit Prague or London to experience the adventures of Hercule Benoit. All you need to do is stop by the Clarence Brown Theatre up until Sept. 24 to catch a ride on the world famous Orient Express.