

George Hartpence and Dan Keyser in "Sleuth" at Kelsey Theatre.

STAGE REVIEW: 'Sleuth' at Kelsey Theatre

By Anthony Stoeckert

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George Hartpence and Dan Keyser in "Sleuth" at Kelsey Theatre.

"Sleuth" isn't a mystery so much as it's a puzzle. Indeed, one of the play's main characters is a mystery writer who loves games, tricks and bits of deceit. At no point is the audience wondering whodunit, instead we're trying to figure out how it all the pieces fit together.

The play by Anthony Shaffer debuted on Broadway in 1970 and won the Tony for Best Play. It was adapted into a hit film starring Laurence Olivier and Michael Caine, and was the last movie directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. A remake starring Caine (now playing the older character) and Jude Law was released in 2007, and was less successful.

Maurer Productions OnStage is presenting "Sleuth" at Kelsey Theatre through Oct. 15, and reviewing it accurately without spoiling the fun is a challenging task. Having seen the movie years ago, it's impossible for me to not know the story's twists and turns. Even seeing the original movie spoils a key twist because of Caine's stardom.

The story is set in the home of Andrew Wyke (played by George Hartpence). He's a successful mystery writer who is visited by a young man named Milo Tindle (Dan Keyser). Milo is in love with Andrew's wife and is asking permission to marry her. Andrew seems fine with this, and admires Milo for asking permission. But he has his doubts, "Can you afford to take her off my hands?" he asks Milo.

The situation gets tense as they talk about the wife, Marguerite. Milo gets angry when Andrew insults her and says he's disparaging the woman he loves. "On the contrary, I was reminiscing about my wife," Andrew shoots back.

Still, Andrew says he wants to help Milo. He hatches a scheme in which Andrew breaks into the house and steals Marguerite's jewelry, this way he can sell them and Andrew can claim the insurance.

It's a crazy scheme, but Andrew convinces Milo, "You have an expensive woman and no money," he tells the young man.

Regardless of how well you know the play, or what you figure out if you don't know it, this is well worth seeing because "Sleuth" is fun even if you know it, and because the acting is great. Hartpence is fantastic as Andrew. He carries the swagger of a successful, somewhat cocky, man, who enjoys having power over this younger, somewhat intimidated man. Hartpence does a lot of talking and is in full command of his lines, filling the theater with a voice that is near royal. He also gets plenty of laughs, both with zingers, and physical comedy.

Keyser is also quite good. His part is tricky, as he starts off intimidated by this powerful man, but subtly gains confidence. Keyser also has to master a few accents and does a terrific job with them. He deserves more praise, but heaping it on would ruin a few plot turns.

The set by John M. Maurer is one of the best I've seen at Kelsey. It's a terrific representation of an English country home, owned by a mystery writer. A stair case leads to a small upstairs room, weapons decorate the wall and other mysterious items, such as a mummy's tomb are featured. There's also a bookshelf full of Andrew's mysteries, a grandfather clock, and windows with a glass-stained appearance.

Most impressive is the artwork. A convincing bust of Hartpence is featured, and leads to a joke. Also important is a painting of Andrew's wife, which is a painting of Hartpence's real-life wife, Carol Thompson.

The direction by Diana Gilman Maurer is pitch-perfect, the pace is lively but never rushed, and all the plot turns are quite clear in Maurer's hands.

It's a really fun night. If you don't know the show and can't figure out what's going on, don't stress out too much, just enjoy it. Everything will work out in the end.

"Sleuth" continues at Kelsey Theatre on the campus of Mercer County Community College, 1200 Old Trenton Road, West Windsor, through Oct. 15. Performances: Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$18, \$16 seniors, \$14 students/children; www.kelseyatmccc.org; 609-570-3333.