

Murder and other hijinks

Dusting off the laughs in a community-theater staple



For anyone viewing a performance of *Arsenic and Old Lace*—now showing at Chico Theater Company—it helps to go in knowing that the play is a dark farce. It's easy to be fooled by the seeming ordinariness, even

sweetness, of its two principal murderers, the spinster aunts, Martha and Abby Brewster (Sandy Huseh and JJ Hunt, respectively).

It turns out the gals are happily putting poison in the homemade elderberry wine they serve to the elderly gentlemen who board in their house. They say they just want to relieve them of their lonely suffering. At last count the biddies had killed a baker's dozen of them and buried all but their most recent victim in the cellar. As the play begins, that poor fellow is stashed in the window seat.

Written by Joseph Kesselring, the play was a big hit and a welcome diversion from the gloom of war following its 1941 Broadway premiere, running for 1,444 performances. Its

1944 film version, directed by Frank Capra and starring Cary Grant, was even more successful and long ago was recognized as a comedy classic.

More recently, the play has become a popular vehicle for community theater productions, such as the one that opened last Friday (July 12) at CTC.

The story centers around Mortimer Brewster (Alex Limper), Abby and Martha's nephew. He's a drama critic in Brooklyn who is dealing with family issues while nervously deciding whether to go ahead with his promise to marry the woman he loves. She's Elaine Harper (Kaitlin Tracy), who lives next door and is the local minister's daughter.

The first time the audience begins to think something is amiss in the Brewster family is when Teddy Brewster

The murderous Jonathan Brewster (Bill Petree, left) and his accomplice Dr. Einstein (John Los) stand over Mortimer Brewster (Alex Limper) in *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

PHOTO BY SUE ANDERSON/BLACK CAT PHOTOGRAPHY

(Denver Nash), Mortimer's brother, appears. He's not a killer, but he's clearly nuts. He thinks he's President Teddy Roosevelt and periodically runs up the stairs—yelling, “Charge!” as if attacking San Juan Hill—with his aunts looking on in amusement. To them this is normal behavior.

As it turns out, it's Teddy who is burying the bodies in the cellar. He thinks they died from yellow fever while building the Panama Canal.

Things get complicated when Mortimer's long-absent brother, Jonathan (Bill Petree), shows up accompanied by his sidekick, the bibulous plastic surgeon Dr. Einstein (John Los). Like his aunts, Jonathan is a serial murderer who has killed a dozen men and is looking for a place to stash his 13th victim.

That's the setup: two groups of a dozen dead men, two more dead men needing a grave, and one window seat, with a romance on the side. Madness ensues.

It's fair to say that much of the time CTC's staging is successful—which is to say, really funny—but not always. At the performance I saw Saturday (July 13), the actors at times seemed to be reading lines rather than creating indelible characters. Their portrayals too often were either on the nose or over the top.

To be fair, the play generated a lot of laughs, especially as its setups started paying off (and the bodies started piling up). And other elements—especially the excellent and versatile set designed by David Bristow, who also directed—were first-rate.

Some of the performances were quite good. I especially liked what Los did with the character of Dr. Einstein. With his gigantic white eyebrows, wild hair (à la the other Dr. Einstein) and slurred speech, he was the funniest person on the stage, as was intended. □

by
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Review:
Arsenic & Old Lace
shows Thursday–
Saturday, 7:30 p.m.
& Sunday, 2 p.m.,
through July 28.
Tickets: \$14–\$18

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