

KINGSTON

Mystery, but no Poirot, in Coach House Players' 'Murder on the Nile'

By Brian Hubert

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Editor's Note: Due to a production error, this story did not run in its entirety in Friday's Preview section.

Newlywed Kay (Ridgeway) Mostyn and her husband Simon Mostyn take a honeymoon cruise down the Nile, but the trip goes awry for everyone aboard when a brutal murder occurs in Coach House Players' staging of Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile."

The play opens Friday, April 5.

Also on the cruise are a long list of suspects, said Barbara Melzer, the play's director. Melzer, a self-professed Agatha Christie buff, said she can say there's at least one murder, but Christie never just had one.

"There are more motives than you can imagine," she said.

Enlargements of photos from the Nile built into the set give the audience a feeling of being aboard the paddlewheel steamer the Lotus, according to Melzer.

The passengers include an aunt and her niece, a doctor, a passenger who is not giving out his real name and another person who is following people, Melzer said. Notably absent from this journey's manifest is Christie's iconic sleuth, Hercule Poirot.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Patricia Cohen, as newlywed Kay (Ridgeway) Mostyn on her honeymoon voyage on the Nile, is shown with her uncle and trust executor Canon Pennefather, played by Peter Pius, in a scene from "Murder on the Nile."

le cracked the case.

Melzer, who first got involved in the theater when she tap danced as a 5-year-old, has worked with Coach House for the last four years. She added that, over the years, she's acted and directed in countless productions, and, since 2009, she has taught acting classes

"The thing about our playwright, is she didn't always want Poirot in all of her plays. She took him out of the plays," Melzer said. Ahe added that a Christie play she directed in the past featured a police detective solving the murder, while, in another, Miss Mar-

ple cracked the case.

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on and off in the Hudson Valley.

Many of the characters in "Murder on the Nile" are connected somehow, and some of those connections are hidden, Melzer said.

"People find out things going on beforehand," she said. "People hiding their identity for various reason."

Melzer likened watching the play to peeling the layers off an onion.

"You get started never knowing what's going to happen," she said. "People are not who you think they are."

"She drops all these big hints of who could be the murderer until the end,

KINGSTON

If You Go

WHAT: Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile"

WHEN: Sunday, April 7 and April 12, 13 and 14. Friday and Saturday performances at 7:30 p.m. Sunday matinees at 2 p.m.

WHERE: Coach House Theater, 12 Augusta Street, Kingston

HOW MUCH: \$20, adults; \$18, seniors-62-and-older; \$10, children 18-and-under. Cash, checks and credit cards accepted, although there is a \$1 fee per ticket for credit card purchases.

CONTACT: Box Office (845) 331-2476 or online at <http://coachhouseplayers.org/wordpress/>

when you figure it out."

Also on the boat is Kay's uncle Canon Pennefather, an Anglican Church clergyman who starts to ask a lot of questions about the murder, Melzer said.

"He's the deep thinker on the boat, trying to figure out the mystery," she said.

And he uses his status as clergyman to his advantage by making the passengers feel comfortable to open up, according to Melzer. But that doesn't mean he's necessarily innocent, she said.

The clues Christie drops lead the audience to a lot of different people, including Canon Pennefather, Melzer said.

Melzer said the passengers are played by a core of Coach House regulars along with four cast members new to the Coach House stage, including a couple of local teens.

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"Theater can't exist unless you can get new people: Broadway, Community theater or regional theater," Melzer said.

Among the regulars is Peter Pius, who plays Canon Pennefather. He is no stranger to Christie's plays, having worked on Coach House's previous productions of "The Hollow" and "Murder is Announced."

Pius said it's his first time taking on such a big role.

"It's a tremendous amount of lines, a tremendous presence on stage," Pius said. "That was challenging for me."

Pius said building his character took a lot memorizing, working on the inflections of his speech and figuring out how to present a cannon. He described himself as "fairly religious," but he was raised Catholic, not Anglican or Episcopal.

To see how Protestant

pastors carry themselves, Pius attended services at local Lutheran and Methodist churches.

"The services are a lot different. You get a feel for how they presented themselves," he said. "I discovered they're very mild-mannered, firm, but soft-spoken."

"Those churches have a sermon-orientated service. The clergyman in front of the crowd speaks to the crowd and offers parables and advice and reassurance of faith."

Canon Pennefather is, overall, a very likable person, but, sometimes, the other passengers get annoyed with some of his tactics, Pius said. He added that, for the most part, the passengers feel comfortable around him and find his advice reassuring.

"When he's giving advice or minor criticisms, they realize what he's doing is helping them, reassuring them, whatever the situation is," Pius said.

Pius, who's played in-

spectors in the past, said this role requires a different approach.

"As a clergyman, he's not as gruff or demanding," he said. "He didn't push it hard. He does it in a very soft-spoken roundabout way to get people to admit to things."

Pius also said that, unlike many murder mysteries, it's not clear at the beginning that Canon Pennefather's a sleuth until he's thrust into the position.

"He's given the responsibility of finding out what has happened, what's going on," he said.

Pennefather set out with the intention of touring the Middle East, including Jerusalem and Palestine, as part of a plan of raising funds to help poor people back in England, Pius said.

"He's a religious scholar," he said. "He's conscious of the poor. He collects funds to build a Jerusalem in England, giving housing and food."

On the boat, he finds potential donors, including an

older woman, a doctor and the daughter of a businessman who's fairly well off.

"At the beginning, he's just another passenger," Pius said.

Pius admitted it was a bit of stretch to take on the role.

"I'm not quite as soft-spoken as he is," Pius said. "I have a crazy fun side playing a very subdued and a very serious role."

"It took a while to get the calmness to come out, not be so boisterous, but more subtle and serious."

Pius said the role required him to get used to wearing a clergy shirt and clerical collar.

"We manage to widen up the neck and still have the collar stay in there," he said. "It's not too bad."

While the role doesn't require preaching, Pius said he does have to give a passenger advice using a parable from the Bible.

"It's interesting and challenging," he said. "I like to play roles out of my box or comfort zone."