



See our complete Education Programming at ThePublicTheatre.org

Educational Underwriters



MARGARET E. BURNHAM
CHARITABLE TRUST



Helen & George Ladd
Charitable Corporation



Young Audience Show Sponsors

Norway Savings Bank

Education Partners

Carrabassett Coffee Company
Hilton Garden Inn Auburn Riverwatch
Key Bank

Lewiston/Auburn Children's Foundation
Liberty Mutual Insurance
Ramada Hotel & Conference Center

Season Supporters

Auburn-Lewiston YMCA
Evergreen Custom Printing
F.X. Marcotte Furniture
HomeLight, Inc.
The Italian Bakery
Lisa Laliberte State Farm Insurance*

Marden's Discount
Sherwin-Williams
Roy I. Snow, Inc.
The Vault
YWCA of Central Maine

**Performance Sponsor*

The Victorian Ladies' Detective Collective

by Patricia Milton

An Audience Guide

The Public Theatre - Lewiston, ME

Christopher Schario, Executive/Artistic Director

Liz Carlson, Dramaturg

November 2022

ABOUT THE PLAY

Plot Summary.

It is 1893 and there is a killer on the loose in London. The police have few leads, and the murderer continues to prey on young actresses at an alarming rate. Retired actress and aspiring detective, Loveday Fortiscue, is determined to aid police in finding the killer, but when her help is rebuffed, she decides she must take matters into her own hands. Enlisting her unwilling sister, Valeria Hunter, and their American lodger, Katie Smalls, the three women set out to catch the Battersea Butcher.

Plagued by incompetent and unscrupulous men, including lecherous theatre producer Jasbry Warham-Wynn, uncooperative police constable Henry Crane and Toddy, the cat's meat man, all of whom seem like potential suspects, it is up to Loveday, Valeria and Katie to defy the patriarchal constraints on their gender and deliver justice for their slain sisters, even as they themselves become targets.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Jack the Ripper.

*LOVEDAY: If the Battersea Butcher is not brought into custody, and soon, more women will die.
And those who live will be in a state of paralyzing panic. It will be Jack the Ripper all over again!*
-Act I, Scene I

Jack the Ripper is one of the most famous serial killers of all time, murdering at least five women between August and November of 1888 in the Whitechapel neighborhood of London.

There is much speculation about the exact number of his victims, given the large number of attacks on women in that time and place, with the five that were killed in 1888 the most agreed upon number. Those killings followed a

pattern of mutilation that lead police to suspect someone with some surgical knowledge. There are multiple suspects in the case including barbers, barristers, and baronets but no one was ever convicted.¹

At the time, it was assumed that the killer was targeting prostitutes in Whitechapel, an impoverished district in London's East End. In her book, *The Five: The Untold Lives of the Women Killed by Jack the Ripper* (2019), Hallie Rubenhold argues that the assumption of these women as prostitutes by the media and general public was based on the classism and misogyny rampant at the time and that only one of those five victims was legitimately a sex-worker. The other victims were simply impoverished women, who were labeled prostitutes for a more sensational story.²

The media frenzy surrounding Jack the Ripper has led to blurry lines between fact and fiction. Newspapers at the time received dozens of letters from people claiming to be or know the identity of the killer and these were published alongside wild speculations reported as fact. To this day, the myth and mystery of Jack the Ripper fascinates scholars, artists, and true crime enthusiasts.

The true identity of Jack the Ripper remains unknown.

The New Woman & the Bicycle.

LOVEDAY: ...Our society trembles with the fear of change. Anxiety as foreigners flood the city. The terror of Fenian bombs. Organized workers, who strike, and issue demands of their employers. Most petrifying of all: the New Woman, who would maintain her independence apart from men.
-Act I, Scene II

The New Woman is a feminist ideal that emerged at the end of the 19th Century. Due to a number of factors (particularly war and immigration) in some urban environments, women began to outnumber men significantly. The fact of this changing demographic created both demand and opportunity for a change in women's role in society. Many women at this time are either not marrying, or delaying marriage, leaving space for, particularly middle-class women, to expand the previously narrow possibilities of their lives. This included receiving post-secondary education, entering the workforce, and seeking political, legal, and social equality.³

The bicycle became a symbol of this New Woman. At once an independent mode of transportation, a source of healthful exercise, and necessitating a more masculine 'rational dress' (trousers or divided skirts) in order to operate more easily, the bicycle gave women the possibility of greater individual autonomy. Though in the 1890s

¹ Jenkins, Philip. "Jack the Ripper | Identity, Facts, Victims, and Suspects." *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jack-the-Ripper>. Accessed 22 September 2022.

² Cain, Sian, and Hallie Rubenhold. "Hallie Rubenhold: 'Jack the Ripper's victims have just become corpses. Can't we do better?'" *The Guardian*, 1 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/01/hallie-rubenhold-jack-the-ripper-victims>. Accessed 22 September 2022.

³ MacPike, Lorelee. "The New Woman, Childbearing, and the Reconstruction of Gender, 1880-1900." *NWSA Journal*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1989, pp. 368-97. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4315921>. Accessed 21 Sep. 2022.

most cycling women still chose to wear less practical, but more socially acceptable long skirts, the image of a young, fit, Victorian woman on a bicycle in 'rational dress' became inextricably linked to broader ideas of shifting gender roles and women's rights, including suffrage.⁴

Sherlock Holmes and the Rise of Modern Detective Fiction.

VALERIA: *My sister can be of substantial assistance to you. She bears many of the attributes of Mister Sherlock Holmes.*

CRANE: *Sneers at the police, for example?*

VALERIA: *Assembles scrapbooks. Never married. A moody, untidy, self-indulgent atheist. Has exactly one friend.*

LOVEDAY: *Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character.*

-Act I, Scene I

Detective Fiction is, to this day, one of the most popular genres in literature and television, with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's cerebral hero still a popular character after more than a century. Though not the first modern detective story (that honor is typically given to Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin, solving *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*), Sherlock Holmes has remained an unwavering model for the genre.

The first Sherlock Holmes mystery, *A Study in Scarlet*, was published in 1887 as a 'shilling shocker' - cheap, serialized fiction for the masses. The Elementary Education Act of 1870 enacted compulsory education for all children, ages 5-13 in England and Wales,⁵ the result of which was that there was now a large segment of the population who were both literate and poor, which led to a massive appetite for low-cost, entertaining reading material.

What is it about Sherlock Holmes that has captured our imaginations for decades? Why has his impact on the genre been so lasting and profound?

"How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?"

- Sherlock Holmes in *The Sign of Four* by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Holmes is a character of preternatural logic, observation, and scientific knowledge. His side-kick Dr. Watson is almost always (like the reader) a step or two behind. This allows the reader to remain engaged and in anticipation, rather than either solving the case before the detective or being so unable to follow the threads that one loses interest. Watson, as the chronicler of his sleuthing friend, becomes a stand-in for the reader allowing us to feel that we are on the brink of the discovery alongside Holmes and Watson. This relationship: a too-smart detective and their less-smart, but incredibly loyal friend, is an archetype that resurfaces frequently in the genre (Agatha Christie's Poirot and Hastings, for example).

⁴ "Rational dress and the New Woman." *University of Warwick*, 23 March 2022, https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/archives_online/exhibitions/newwoman/rational/. Accessed 22 September 2022.

⁵ Dalglish, Walter. *A Plain Reading of the Elementary Education Act*. London, John Marshall & Co., 1870.

Doyle also gives us the arch-criminal in Professor Moriarity. A character who is so clever in his evil-doing that he is beyond the capacity and capabilities of normal law enforcement, and can only be foiled by the brilliant Sherlock Holmes. A criminal who can only be stopped by a detective (or Ladies' Detective Collective) counterpart with their specific skills and experience keeps the stakes of the story high and personal for the protagonist..

Additionally, Doyle, through Holmes gives us a window into cutting-edge forensic science at the time. Sherlock Holmes can be found testing blood and comparing fingerprints to solve his cases, relying on the stories the physical evidence constructs to come to his conclusions. Holmes is a Renaissance man, with a mind-boggling breadth of skills and interests, but the stories are not without coincidences, improbabilities, and jumps in logic: a little absurdity to counter-act all that evidence and reason, creates an enduring and entertaining mix that engages mystery-lovers to this day.⁶

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

*Patricia Milton's plays have been performed in New York, Boston, Istanbul, San Francisco, and places in between. Her values are: laughter, candor, artistic excellence, determination, integrity, generosity, and feminism. She is a Resident Playwright at Central Works in Berkeley, CA.*⁷

In late September, in the lead-up to our production, Patricia agreed to answer a few of my questions about this play and her process.

- Liz Carlson, Dramaturg

In Conversation with Playwright Patricia Milton.

Liz Carlson: What inspired you to write this play? What were the first seeds of it for you?

Patricia Milton: I have always wanted to write a play exploring how Victorian social and gender restrictions persist, regrettably, to this day. Also, I once worked at an airfreight company where a shy guy in Accounting turned out to be a serial killer. If you combine these two, apparently you get "Victorian Ladies." As I did script research, I found case after case, past and present, where murder investigations were impeded because the police didn't believe women's testimony. That became a factor in the play as well.

LC: This play takes place over 100 years ago, but there is a lot in it that resonates today. What are the benefits and/or pitfalls of creating a piece that has this distance of time?

PM: I deliberately chose plot points and characters that would resonate with modern audiences. Certainly the teeming streets of Victorian London, with its many immigrants from all over the world, rapid changes to society,

⁶ Sutherland, John. "Sherlock Holmes, the world's most famous literary detective." *The British Library*, 15 March 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/arthur-conan-doyle-the-creator-of-sherlock-holmes-the-worlds-most-famous-literary-detective>. Accessed 27 September 2022.

⁷ Milton, Patricia. "About." *Patricia Milton*, <https://www.patricia-milton.com/about-patricia-milton/>. Accessed 21 September 2022.

roles of men and women in flux, will seem familiar to many. I also wrote about a group of women who have some very modern ideas and who demand agency in their pursuit of survival. While this type of woman was by no means pervasive, women like this definitely lived in the 1800s. It's a benefit for us to see ourselves in the past; it helps us gain perspective. We can see how far we've come in some ways and how much we still have to progress in others. One drawback for me is that I love to do research, and at some point I have to stop and write the play.

LC: This play is at once a comedy, a mystery about the serial murder of women, and delves into some pertinent social commentary. How do you approach blending all these elements as a playwright? How can you tell when you've got a good mix?

PM: Most of my scripts are comedic, feature some kind of social commentary, and place women at the center of the action. I want my plays never to be preachy, and audiences appreciate that. I do intensive research, and if I have a specific idea I want to get across, I will write an essay about it. Then I set aside that essay and get down to writing characters taking action. I love to do readings of various drafts with actors, inviting trusted friends whose feedback helps me to know when I've reached the right mix.

LC: You choose to have one actor play all the male roles. How does this deepen or complicate the storytelling for you?

PM: I hope it's a fun role for the actor! I know the audience finds it delightful to see the same actor play different roles: it's quite theatrical. As the playwright, I have to make sure I allow enough time for the actor to change costumes (and apply a mustache if needed) before his next entrance. For me, I wanted the focus to be on the women detectives and on the victims; I've noticed sometimes society becomes entranced by the killer and forgets the victims. As I am making commentary on misogyny, one actor handily stands in for the larger societal mistreatment and punishment of women.

LC: These characters are ones you revisit in the subsequent play: *Escape from the Asylum*. What about them inspires you to keep telling their stories? Are there more *Victorian Ladies' Detective Collective* plays in your future?

PM: In "Escape," I explore the common tropes about women being "hysterical," and "overly emotional." The research into that history is shocking and disturbing.

I have been getting requests for a third in the series. These women are delightful to write, so I'm definitely not averse. The mystery is such a rigid genre, wherein the solution "returns everything to normal." But do we really want everything to stay the same? Or do we want things to get better? So the mystery genre begs to be disrupted and subverted, which is an enjoyable challenge.

LC: Your work is typically developed and premieres at *Central Works* in Berkeley, California. What are the benefits of having a long-standing relationship with a company that is committed to the development of new work?

PM: I'm so grateful to be a part of Central Works, whose co-directors are Gary Graves and Jan Zvaifler. I have worked with other companies, and with mounting a new play, it can make you feel like Sisyphus! Central Works

has over 30 years of experience exclusively developing new plays. The Central Works Method brings actors into the scriptwriting process early on, where they contribute ideas and really invest in their characters.

A new play is a difficult animal. I have to admit to writing entirely new scenes in the final weeks of rehearsal. It made the play better, but it was hard. Central Works has the experience and knowledge to support whatever needs to happen to make the play successful.

LC: What keeps you coming back to playwriting as a form? What do you love about it?

PM: I love this question! Theater is a collaborative, unique artistic experience, and writing a play is creating a blueprint for that. The actors embody the play, and the audience collaborates, too. A study at University College London found that while watching a live theater performance, people's heartbeats can synchronize, even with strangers. We are all of us - actors, tech folks, and audience - participating in the same multi-dimensional experience in the same time and in the same space, and aligning our hearts. It will never happen again. That's thrilling to me. We can't participate in the same way with a screen.

You can find out more about Patricia and her work at: <https://www.patricia-milton.com/>

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. This play is set in 1893, are there issues that these characters are dealing with that we deal with today? How has society changed? How has it stayed the same?
2. The Female Detective Story is a popular genre. Who are some other female detective characters you have encountered? What is it about these characters and stories that make them so appealing?
3. These women are able to solve the case when the police and the Battersea Vigilance Committee are not. What attributes do they possess that contribute to their success?
4. How do you define justice? Was it served at the end of the play? Why or why not?
5. Playwright Patricia Milton has written another play with Loveday, Valeria, and Katie as the protagonists. What curiosities do you still have about these characters? What do you hope to find out in a future play?
6. If you were to start your own detective collective, who would you invite to join you and why? What kinds of crimes or mysteries would you solve?

Elizabeth (Liz) Carlson (she/her) is a Visiting Instructor of Theatre teaching Intro to Performance Studies, Devising Performance, and Dramaturgy among other courses this year at Bates. She is a director, dramaturge, and teaching artist with a particular interest in ensemble practice and new play development.

She has an MFA in Directing from Temple University and is an associate member of SDC (Stage Directors and Choreographers Society). She has worked with companies throughout the northeast including Curio Theatre Company, Arden Theatre Company, Lantern Theatre (Philadelphia), Troy Foundry Theatre, Saratoga Shakespeare Company (New York), The Nora (Boston), Trinity Rep, Manton Avenue Project (Rhode Island), and The Kenyon Review Playwrights Conference (Ohio). Additionally, she serves as a dramaturge to several playwrights, choreographers, and devising ensembles. She can often be found making work in unconventional spaces including libraries, prisons, and semi-abandoned industrial sites.

She has taught at Temple University, Kenyon College, Rowan University, Friends' Central School, and Eastern University, among others, and she especially loves making theatre with undergraduates. Some of her favorite academic directing projects include *Love & Information* by Caryl Churchill, *In the Red and Brown Water* by Tarell Alvin McCraney (Temple University), *Be Aggressive* by Annie Weisman (Kenyon College), and *Three Sisters* by Anton Chekhov (Eastern University).