

Talented cast brings comedy drama 'The Victorian Ladies' Detective Collective' to The Public Theatre

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'The production's four gifted actors capture the macabre tension, ribald bawdiness and amoral conventions of late 19th-century England' as three women try to stop a killer.'

In the finest and equally appalling traditions of the Victorian Era, contemporary playwright Patricia Milton has, in "The Victorian Ladies' Detective Collective," crafted a play of comic drama that borrows liberally and cheekily from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Oscar Wilde.

The Public Theater of Lewiston's current production offers a visually stunning set, compelling costuming and the mannered wordiness of the era that transport the audience back to 1893.

Beautiful period costuming by Anne Collins is rich and colorful. Floor-length dresses with ruffled sleeves, bodices, gloves, wraps and hats dress the ladies and never an ankle is shown. Jennifer Madigan's set is wonderfully decorated with carved furniture, garish wallpaper, figurines, paintings and photographs. A tiled fireplace lends authenticity and a tall bay window as the center of the parlor comes alive with the changing light of the day. Original music from Scott O'Brien looms ominously in blackout scene changes. And the wonderful British accent delivered by the talented cast completes the transformation to a different time and place.

Directed by the theater's Executive/Artistic Director Christopher Schario, the production's four gifted actors capture the macabre tension, ribald bawdiness and amoral conventions of late 19th-century England. As the principal denizens of a boarding house for single ladies, three women balk at the toxic masculinity of the time as they seek to solve the grisly serial murders in their immediate neighborhood.

Joyce Cohen, as Valeria Hunter, is perfect as a tight-fisted business woman. She is a widow who dotes on her cat and seemingly has little use for the actresses who populate her lodging house. That includes her sister Loveday Fortescue, a destitute former actress residing with her by virtue of Valeria's miserly charity. Valeria's backstory is one of the mysteries that is revealed as the search for the killer unfolds. Her taste for opium tinctures adds to her mystique.

As Loveday Fortescue, Robyne Parrish dramatically inhabits the persona of a women wronged at every turn as a result of her impertinent pursuit of a career in the theater. She passionately believes she is every bit the sleuth as Sherlock Holmes. Even Valeria snarkily frames their similarities: "Assembles scrapbooks. Never married. A moody, untidy, self-indulgent atheist. Has exactly one friend." The mystery of Loveday's history crystallizes as the plot unfolds, as well.



From left, Courtney Thomas as Katie Smalls, Robyne Parrish as Loveday Fortescue, and Joyce Cohen as Valeria Hunter are hot on the trail of a murderer in the comic drama "The Victorian Ladies' Detective Collective"

Courtney Thomas, as the American expatriate actress Katherine “Katie” Smalls, is a volatile, kickass counterpart to the staid ladies of London who become her sleuthing co-conspirators. Just as committed to alleviating the threat of the ever-increasing murder total, she conspires with Valeria and Loveday to uncover the identity of the murderer with walloping physicality.

The fourth and final member of the cast is Mathew Zimmerer, who wonderfully and distinctively portrays a testosterone trio of characters: first as Police Constable Crane, the bobby on the case; next as Jasbry Warham Wynn, the lascivious dandy with a past relationship to Loveday; and finally as Toddy, the cockney purveyor of cat meat for Valeria’s furry friend. “His meat is FOR cats, not OF cats. Generally, ground up horses, or meat that may be ‘on the turn’ and therefore unsuitable, even for pies.” His bloody appearance redirects the ladies’ suspicion that he just may be the gruesome culprit.

The “culprit” is sensationalized in all the papers as The Battersbea Butcher, blamed for several grisly murders a la Jack the Ripper. This has the women at Valeria Hunter’s lodging house for single ladies fearing for their lives. Loveday vows to aid the “incompetent constabulary” in exposing the identity of the killer.

Her offers of assistance are rebuffed in the double standard of the day that a woman’s place is one of domesticity. PC Crane, the bobby investigating the murders, declares with haughty disdain, “I must point out that while men may be detectives, it is proper that women cook, clean, look after their husbands, raise children . . . in short, remain fully devoted to the domestic sphere.”

That, coupled with the trope of the period that actresses and prostitutes are virtually one and the same, makes the male cast characters totally dismissive of Loveday’s entreaties to apply her thespian skills to ferret out the murderer. “I have played breeches roles (male characters) . . . I have common sense,” says Loveday. “I hold the keen understanding of human nature an actress must, in order to practice her craft. Stage cosmetics skills! I could go in disguise on the streets of London!”)

Niggling clues, red herrings and forensic research into the pathological profile of the killer come into play as the ladies delve into a medical journal of the era, the “Psychopathia Sexualis” by Krafft-Ebing. The women dig deeper, diligently assembling news clippings, photographs and random clues while dealing with the three male misogynistic characters — each of whom in his own way portrays the panoply of patriarchal poppycock designed to keep the ladies in their place.

As homage to Arthur Conan Doyle’s megalomaniac Professor Moriarty, Holmes’s nemesis, a coded clue from the killer emerges hinting that the next victim will be one of the Victorian lady detectives. Can they uncover the killer’s identity before one of them is brutally murdered as well?

This most entertaining play runs Thursday through Sunday, Nov. 10 to 13, with performances each evening, Thursday through Saturday, at 7:30 p.m. as well as matinees Saturday, Nov. 12, at 3 p.m. and Sunday, Nov. 13, at 2 p.m.