A mock musical murder mystery, mum

■ South Valley Civic Theatre puts on a British-mannered whodunit in song, style and satire

By WALLACE BAINE
Staff Writer

Malice, mischief, mayhem, murder

Just my cup of tea.

The first thing you need to know about "Something's Afoot," the new musical whodunit staged by South Valley Civic Theatre, is that the butler didn't do it.

In fact, Clive (Russ Brawn), the butler of Lord Rancour's country estate, falls stone-cold dead before the seats are warm. From that point, the play takes off in a dozen swirling directions in a series of intriguing revelations and finger-pointing suspicions.

The setting is the drawing room of Lord Rancour's English island retreat. The host of the manor only appears in the play in the form of an enigmatic oil painting on the wall watching each scene unfold.

Rancour has invited six guests for a weekend in the country at his estate. None of the guests are aware others are also invited. The six arrive prepared for a relaxing vacation with Lord Rancour, but shortly afterward a sudden storm washes out the bridge to the mainland. The guests are stranded in the mansion left to ponder the inexplicable deaths of Lord Rancour, shot with a pistol at close range, and Clive, killed on an exploding staircase shortly after finding Rancour's body.

Caught in the web of intrigue are: Lord Rancour's playboy nephew and heir to his fortune Nigel (Chris Souza), the aristocratic Lady Grace Manley-Prowe (Lindy Mallonee), the barrel-chested Hemingway-like former army officer Colonel Gillweather (Don Hayes), the meticulous spinster Miss Tweed (Betsy Andrade), the debonair family doctor Dr. Grayburn (John Varela) and the virginal young Hope Langdon (Cheryl Nielsen).

Also implicated are two of the Lord's servants: the slow-witted caretaker Flint (Tony Andrade) and the scattered-brained Cockney maid Lettie (Ruth E. Mullins).

Add to the mix one final wild card: a young college student named Geoffrey (Chris Brace) who appears at the mansion looking for shelter after the storm capsized his rowboat.

Director Carol Harris plays the script with an ironic jab at the overly mannered English mysteries epitomized by Agatha Christie. The campy organ music is hyped up for effect and the result is an engaging comedy with real dramatic tension.

This is certainly not Serious Theatre, nor is it meant to be. The wild special effects, the spontaneous musical numbers and the flippant acting make for a fun evening.

Ruth E. Mullins is stellar in her role as Lettie, the high-strung, perpetually flustered serving maid. She's also the cast's best screamer, and in this play, she gets plenty of opportunities.

Cheryl Nielsen's performance as the moony-eyed maiden Hope Langdon also keeps the play entertaining.

But perhaps the star of "Something's Afoot" is Betsy Andrade, who plays the shrewish Miss Tweed, the play's answer to "Murder She Wrote's" Jessica Fletcher. The meddling Miss Tweed struts through the play looking for clues and motives like a busybody aunt looking for signs of dust gathering under the furniture. She takes the lead in the impromptu murder investigation, implicating each of the others, whispering "suspicious" each time.

In "Something's Afoot" the characters react to murder by ordering another round of sherry and treat the situation as nothing more than a bit of unpleasantness ("I'm going up to my room to adjust my cumberbund!").

For theatre audiences who like a laugh with their pot-boiling murder mystery, "Something's Afoot" gives a generous dose of both. But if you like to bet on who is eventually discovered to be the murderer, don't lay odds on the butler. In this one, the much-maligned chap is fatally innocent.



LISA BROWN/Staff Photographer

Betsy Andrade, center, stars as the spinster slueth Miss Tweed in South Valley Civic Theatre's production of "Something's Afoot" opening Friday at the Flying Lady restaurant in Morgan Hill.

What: "Something's Afoot," a musical murder mystery presented by South Valley Civic Theatre.

When: Nov. 9-10, 16-17, 23-24. 6:30 p.m. dinner; 8 p.m. curtain.

Where: The Flying Lady Restaurant, 15060 Foothill Ave., Morgan Hill.

Director: Carol Harris

Producers: Grace Brawn and Gayle Montalvo

Choreography: Debbie Priest

Cast: Betsy Andrade as Miss Tweed; Tony Andrade as Flint; Chris Brace as Geoffrey; Russ Brawn as Clive; Don Hayes as Colonel Gillweather; Lindy Mallonee as Lady Grace Manley-Prowe; Ruth E. Mullins as Lettie; Cheryl Nielsen as Hope Langdon; Chris Souza as Nigel Rancour; John Varela as Dr. Grayburn.

Tickets: $25 for both dinner and play. Diners may choose from Chicken Cordon Bleu or Salmon Wellington. All seats are reserved.

Reservations and details: 842-SHOW.

IN MAYA 'PINION

Theater at its best

"Something's Afoot" is a delightful play. The latest South Valley Civic Theatre production, now playing at the Flying Lady Restaurant, offers a thoroughly charming and enjoyable evening of theater. Last Friday's opening night audience saw a brilliantly produced and directed musical that triumphed over a bizarre setting and a play that demanded a strong cast and a detailed technical production. It got both.

"Something's Afoot" is a musical spoof of the classic English Agatha Christie genre. You know, the old English estate, murder after murder, the French maid, the family doctor, the proper butler, the sweet thing, the retired colonel, all done in a silly fashion — yet with rapid fire pacing, witty songs, and wonderful performances from a fine cast.

Yes, I liked the show. And yes, the show isn't perfect, but I'm not going to have space to get into that insignificant area. OK, the spears looked very homemade. Yes, you have to get that picky.

Director Carol Harris has pulled from the cast a collection of excellent performances. To me one of the finest compliments a director can get is that her actors perform to their potential. Such was the case with her entire cast. In fact, Chris Souza, John Varela, and Don Hayes all rose above previous efforts and turned in the finest work that I have seen from each of them. Souza plays a strong Nigel Rancour, nasty nephew and hopeful heir of the Rancour fortune. John Varela plays family doctor Greyburn. Don Hayes was nothing but smashing as Col. Gillweather.

I have always had a problem with local theatre doing English accents. They seldom ring true, and hence become more distracting than enhancing. Not with this production, and Hayes perfectly illustrates the point. With the help of accent coach Susan Hoebich, the whole cast was so, so...English. Bully for them. Bully for Hayes. I can't describe what he did with his upper lip, but it sure was stiff. Bully stiff. His walk wasn't quite as stiff, but his lip sure was.

The show stars Betsy Andrade as Miss Tweed, the Christie-like character. Andrade's energy and showmanship are outstanding, as usual. What a fine performer. She would have been good enough to carry the show, but in this case she doesn't have to.

The rest of the marvelous cast must be mentioned individually. Russ Brawn, in his first local role, is the best English butler I have seen in a long time. Tony Andrade plays Flint, the estate's custodian and a man of a thousand grabs. (Flint loves to touch flesh, and does it all evening long. It's a case of typecasting.) As always, he is enjoyable to watch, and displays a surprisingly strong voice.

Linda Mallonee and Cheryl Nielsen were perfectly cast as Lady Grace Manley-Prowe and Hope Langdon. They look, sound and act so right. Both have fine voices.

Chris Brace, looking very much the young Rudy Vallee, plays Hope's romantic counterpoint. He also does a fine job.

Ruth E. Mullins is such a trouper. Though often a lead in local productions, she plays a strong supporting role as Lettie, the maid. She does a stunt with a Chinese vase that you have to see to believe.

Don't forget:"Hair", with Gilroy's Simon Pintello, opens tomorrow at San Jose State, and "Look Homeward, Angel" opens tonight for three days at San Benito High.