

Musical whodunit opens tonight at Main Street Theatre

Written by By TERRY MATHEWS, News-Telegram Arts Editor
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When The Community Players launched their debut season in 1980, they used a whodunit play called “The Butler Did It,” by Tim Kelly. Now, 30 years later, they’re using the same play – set to music.

“The Butler Did It, Singing!” opens tonight at 7:30 at Main Street Theatre, 225 Main Street, for a two weekend run, including a matinee Sunday, March 7, at 2 p.m.

Set in a fabulous mansion called Ravenswood Manor on Turkey Island, off the California coast near San Francisco, the action begins as Miss Maple, a mystery writer and grand hostess, invites several of her writer friends to come for the weekend dressed as the characters in their books.



Father White, played by Betty Green, is the kindly priest who takes a psychological approach to each case. Chandler Marlowe, played by Mike Dodd, is a seedy San Francisco private eye with a special fondness for dames. Louie Fan, played to the hilt by Steve Janway, can’t contain himself and blurts out every thought that runs through his empty head. Laura and Rick Carlisle, played by Rhonda Stoddard and Colton Marrow, are high society’s answer to crime solvers. Scholarly Peter Flimsey, as played by John D’Avignon, is the group’s answer to Sherlock Holmes. Charity Haze, played by Hailey Moore, is a mix of James Bond and Laura Croft.

Miss Maple’s staff includes Haversham, played by understudy Brooke Lancaster, who had an “unpleasantness with a hatchet,” and her personal assistant, Rita Eyelessbrow, played by Cindy Lancaster, who has an unnatural attachment to her hat box.

When one of the characters ends up dead — really dead — everyone becomes a suspect. The writers stay in character as they try to figure out “whodunit” during the “dark and stormy” night that follows.

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Along with his duties as one of the play's main characters, Dodd also serves as the director of this production. He's had some hiccups this week, with two actors being struck with illness.

"Brooke [Lancaster], who plays Haversham, is our understudy," Dodd explained during dress rehearsal Wednesday night. "And Hailey [Moore] is going to deliver her lines from a seat in the audience because she's just not up to being on stage."

Despite the recent setbacks, the cast managed to work their way through the script. There were some rough spots to be sure, but hopefully they'll get the kinks worked out before the lights go up tonight.

The standouts in this production are Steve Janway and Melissa Bilyeu.

Janway provides much-needed comic relief as a Chinese detective with a hilarious speech impediment and absolutely no filter on what comes out of his mouth. In comedy, timing is everything, and Janway is spot on, even though his lines are written to fly out of his mouth just a beat or two behind the rest of the cast. In the second act, Janway gets really wound up, offering some of the production's funniest moments. I'd see the play again just to hear him massacre the English language with such apparent ease. Bravo!

The toughest job in this production is handled beautifully — and almost flawlessly — by accompanist Melissa Bilyeu. These are not songs you'll hear on the radio. They're not even songs you'll be humming when you leave the theatre. Not only did she play the score with some aplomb, Bilyeu was able to adjust her performance to suit the actors as they struggled with some of the lyrics. Kudos to her for being such a pro.

The play runs tonight, Friday and Saturday, March 4, 5 and 6 at 7:30 p.m. Sunday's matinee, March 7, is set for 2 p.m. Next weekend, the play runs Thursday through Saturday, March 11 through 13, at 7:30 p.m. There is no matinee. Tickets are \$10. Reservations are recommended. Call 903-885-0107.

Editor's note: You might want to take a wrap or light lap blanket, as the space was chilly during

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dress rehearsal Wednesday night. It will most likely be warmer with a full house, but it wouldn't hurt to have a little something to keep you warm.