National Operatic & Dramatic Association London Region

Society	:	Banbury Cross Players
Production	:	Inspector Drake and the Perfekt Crime
Date	:	21st March 2025
Venue	:	The Mill Arts Centre, Banbury
District	:	London District 12

Show Report

I am grateful to Justin Clinch for inviting me to report on the Banbury Cross Players' production of "Inspector Drake and the Perfekt Crime". Justin himself was in the production, but the Players' Chairman, Adrian McGlynn, was kind enough to find time for a chat both before the show and during the interval. He kindly provided me with a souvenir programme, which incidentally included some excellent photographs which would grace the display boards of any West End theatre staging an Agatha Christie revival, and told me that the Players felt that Banbury audiences could do with a few laughs, and that that was exactly what they had set out to provide.

And goodness me, how they delivered! All too often a show that promises to be a rip-roaring comedy will be intermittently amusing at best, or raise an occasional wry smile. "Inspector Drake" was laugh-out-loud funny from start to finish. Actually, it was better than that: Director Simon Hook's programme note contained more good jokes than some of the stage comedies I have seen. No potential source of humour was left unexplored: the word play included puns, misunderstandings, ambiguous sentences and deliberate mispronunciations, while the physical comedy ranged from subtle expressions to full-on slapstick. There was mild innuendo too, and it would probably

be best for me not to mention torches or wheel nuts, but there was nothing here likely to compromise the status of the piece as wholesome family entertainment. Above all, the piece was delivered with relentless energy and commitment by a cast that was clearly determined that the audience was going to have a good time. I certainly had a good time, but was that just because the piece appealed to my sense of humour? If so, then I share that sense of humour with just about everyone else who was in the audience.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. "Inspector Drake and the Perfekt Crime" is an unashamed parody of the classic Agatha Christie murder mysteries in which suspects and motives are progressively revealed before the inevitable denouement in the drawing room. There are certain stock characters that regularly feature in such plays: the brilliant detective, the dastardly bounder, the glamorous femme fatale. All were gloriously reproduced here, as the director clearly realises that you have to pay homage to an icon before you can send it up. Thus we had our cerebral detective, working up ever more ingenious theories to explain the accumulating evidence, real and imagined; the arrogant patriarch whose wife has mysteriously disappeared; the poised, seductive daughter who tries to distract the Inspector from his investigations; and the poised, seductive daughter who … oh, hang on, wasn't that last character, Sabrina? So who's this? Miss Short?

Tremendous care had been taken over getting the look of these characters right, and this sometimes meant borrowing from related stereotypes. Inspector Drake wore a raincoat that owed more to Morse than it did to Poirot, but we all understood that here was a maverick operator with a gift for solving crimes. Dr Rupert Short sported the crimson smoking jacket and sock suspenders of the upper class villain, while Sabrina and, er, Miss Short wore vibrant slinky dresses paired with

white bolero jackets and topped off with perfect wavy hair and bright red lipstick. The body language was spot on as well: the restless detective pacing across the room, the darkly suspicious doctor dominating the stage, the glamorous ladies arranging themselves very carefully on the sofa with every crooked finger precisely placed. These characters were augmented by Sergeant Plod, the honest village bobby with his navy tunic, classic helmet and toothbrush moustache. Plod is a more overtly comic creation and drew on a broad range of references from the Keystone Cops to Dixon of Dock Green. He was even furnished with his own lamp post to stand under!

Liz Riley and Jenny Tustian's work on costumes and make-up was complemented by Simon Hook and Richard Ashby's set design, which perfectly conjured up an elegant living room from the 1930s. French windows opened out onto the dark terrace, a solidly constructed interior door gave access to the rest of the house, the handsome green wallpaper and elegant fireplace spoke of taste and class, while the large rug really helped to bring the set forward from the perspective of the audience in the raked seating.

There was terrific detailing in the set dressing, from the globe drinks cabinet to the books on the shelves, the certificate confirming membership of the "200 Club", and the classic three flying ducks. The furniture and properties by Terry Andrews often proved to be vital, either as clues to the mystery or as prompts for the jokes. That fish in a case? A red herring, obviously. The chess set on the occasional table? Your move, Inspector! The fireplace set with the missing poker, and the large beaker of acid? Hmmm. And much, much more along similar lines. I was particularly impressed with the newspapers printed up with relevant headlines; I was also pleased to note that there genuinely was liquid (although

hopefully not acid) in that beaker, and that all the drinks were real enough.

So the cast had plenty to work with, and collectively they extracted every ounce of comedy out of the situation. At the centre of it all was Inspector Drake, brought wonderfully to life by Steve Ramsden. The character possesses almost limitless self-confidence – the Inspector believes in his own exceptionalism, and if one outlandish theory can't accommodate the latest evidence, then fine, here's another! Steve was able to project this, and he cleverly balanced his active participation in the drama with his expositions delivered primarily for the benefit of the audience. He delivered his lines with terrific tonal and dynamic range, often with a bit of a sneer playing on his lips, and his comic timing was spot on. Steve could portray exasperation particularly well, perhaps because the role afforded him plenty of opportunity to perfect this. There was just enough detachment between the actor and the character to accommodate a knowing awareness of when something was being sent up, or when a line was particularly funny, and to share this awareness with the audience.

Steve also proved to be a master of physical comedy as illustrated in his treatment of Plod, and particularly in his propensity to trip over the suitcase. I also enjoyed the way in which he channelled his inner Sherlock Holmes by reaching for his violin; the deliberate mismatch between Drake's playing and the soundtrack was another comic device utilised to good effect. His unprofessional and unsuccessful pursuit of Sabrina and Miss Short was given a welcome touch of swagger, especially when it appears that he might finally have his way; the case has been solved, the champagne is on ice, the hapless Plod has been despatched – what could possibly go wrong?

Ah, Plod. Justin Clinch as the uniformed, and indeed uninformed Sergeant was the perfect foil to Steve's preening Inspector. Justin is a very expressive actor, able to project his character's slow-wittedness by modulating his look from bafflement to flawed comprehension while holding the audience's complete attention. While Drake is often aware of the pitfalls written into the dialogue – such as when he tells Plod to have a photograph blown up – Plod just writes in down in his notebook, carries out his orders quite literally and is confused and upset when things don't work out exactly as he had expected.

As well as being the butt of many of the jokes, Plod finds himself at the wrong end of a lot of the physical comedy, notably when being smacked about (accidentally or otherwise) by Drake. Justin was able was able to project Plod as so hurt and crestfallen that he was eliciting a lot of sympathy from the audience. The routine in which Plod puts his hand in some acid, then panics and thrusts it into the vase of flowers, only to get his hand stuck in the vase was brilliantly executed, as was the sequence which ends with Plod having a sedative injected into his backside; in each case the range of expressions which Justin was able to employ was deeply impressive. The dialogue between Drake and Plod was just as accomplished; I suspect that Steve and Justin knew each other's lines almost as well as their own, and as a result the dialogue flowed seamlessly between them.

There was, of course, a reason for this. I understand that in order to rehearse the physical comedy it was necessary to be "off book" from an early stage in rehearsals. The benefits of this secure knowledge of the script were evident throughout – from the slickness of the knockabout moves to the relentless energy of the narrative and the impeccable timing of the lines.

The supporting cast understood their roles perfectly. Matthew Perris imbued Dr Rupert Short with exactly the right amount of intellectual arrogance: he fancies himself as a criminal mastermind, and he's not going to be thwarted by some jumped up policeman. There was pomposity and invulnerability in this characterisation, and Matthew delivered his lines with a superior air, even when the evidence appeared to be stacking up against him. Zoey Warnock brought an appealing ambiguity to her portrayal of Sabrina: sometimes it almost felt as if Zoey was underplaying the role, thereby winning Drake's trust and the audience's confidence, but then when she herself came under suspicion her actions became more mannered and indignant. Meanwhile, Almira Brion as Miss Short, possibly Sabrina, it all got very confusing, gave a masterclass in body language: she knew exactly when to hold her head up and when to cast her eyes down; nothing was rushed, and nothing was without significance. Almira also demonstrated that she could do hysterical particularly well, but then it had been a funny week. A word also for Helen Wilson as Mrs Victoria Short: I suspected that her appearance in the programme was another dramatic device and that we wouldn't be seeing her on stage at all, but the long wait for her brief appearance was well worth it.

The most challenging moments for both the lighting (Linda Shaw and John Hicks) and sound (Zac Lacey-Rousseau) were probably whenever a shock revelation or insight disrupted the narrative: the classic sequence of brassy chords (ta-da-daaa!) was accompanied by a sudden focusing down of the light onto the actors and their shocked expressions, which won't have been easy to plot or execute. It was, however, yet another example of how director Simon Hook used every tool at his disposal to make this piece as funny as possible. The radio on the mantelpiece was accurately synchronised with the soundtrack, and I was pleased to note that the onstage mirror

had been greased to avoid the stage lighting reflecting around the set.

Is a taxidermist just another name for a taxi driver? Do you consider “Kerplunk” to be the ultimate test of logic? Was Paganini a celebrated escapologist? If your answer to these questions is “Yes” then “Inspector Drake and the Perfekt Crime” might not be the play for you. If on the other hand you appreciate the humour implicit in these questions then this comedy whodunnit is just a brilliant evening’s entertainment. Director Simon Hook and his talented cast delivered a fast-paced, comedic tour de force – far and away the funniest production I have seen in my four years as a NODA Regional Representative. And I haven’t even mentioned the false shirt front.

Andrew Walter
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22nd March 2025