

# Opinion | The perfect crime: Murder on a train at Theatre Aquarius

Agatha Christie show has it all, from hotness to twists to humour.

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By **Jeff Mahoney** Spectator Reporter

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I heard someone behind me in the audience literally gasp at the revelation in Theatre Aquarius's "Murder On The Orient Express" during the preview performance on Wednesday evening.

The revelation? No, not the identity of the killer, but the startling apparition near the beginning, like a spaceship emerging from a fog, of the principal set of the play. It's not a spaceship but the luxurious, multi-chambered, see-through car of a passenger train. It rotates magically as it develops into view on stage and does so several times during the action to disclose itself from all angles.

It is a work of genius that fails to completely steal the show only by virtue of the equally inspiring strength of the cast — and the choreography and blocking of their movement and positioning through the set.



Daniel Kash stars in Theatre Aquarius's "Murder on the Orient Express."  
Dahlia Katz

Is there such a thing as a perfect crime, a perfect murder? The crime in the eye of the snowstorm of the play, both figuratively and literally (a snowstorm stops the train), might not be flawless, however close. After all, Hercule Poirot solves it, but then again, what doesn't he solve, except perhaps the stirrings of his own heart? And to tell you that he solves the crime is not so much a spoiler as a teaser, because a profound existential question hangs over the nature of his "solution."

No, the crime might not technically be perfect, but the staging of it here is as close to being so as is humanly possible. I hoped to bring to this first Theatre Aquarius play review since Gary Smith's retirement some shadow of the master's exacting sharpness and wit of deserved rebuke in his laying out of the bad as well as the good. But I could find precious little to quibble with.



The company of "Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express."  
Dahlia Katz

The cast. There is not a character among the 10 appearing in this production who is not made by these actors to compel and excite us — both with their individual stories and their distinctive secrets, vulnerabilities and balances of hard and soft.

I will start with Nora McLellan as Helen Hubbard, the brayingly loud and hilariously obnoxious American widow, several times over, who seems to get under the skin of all her fellow passengers. McLellan brings a largeness to her character's presence that, for all Hubbard's irritating qualities, makes delicious every second she is on the stage. And the pivot McLellan makes when the truth about her character is revealed near the end is almost athletically impressive ... and done with such conviction.

I may start with McLellan, but I must pause for breath at Daniel Kash's Poirot. What can be said? This legendary role, so well staked out by so many great actors? Kash owns it. He is so impeccably Poirot — his fastidiousness, his grace and his quiet, knowing charm, his radiant intellect. Kash has all of this down, but so much more. There is a weariness that Kash brings to him — he is on vacation as the play opens, near retirement, only taking cases that interest him. Money is of no consequence, and this is a case — the murder in the sleeping car — that he only takes on by necessity, as he is trapped on the snowbound train with the rest of the characters.

But the virtues of the case grow on him rapidly, both as a challenging puzzle and a mystery of the locomotive human passions that drive us to the extremities of interpersonal behaviour. And then there are the stabbings of love's possibility in his own being. Kash paints this all into his portrait of Poirot with the most exquisite touch.

I can't single out any other performances. They are all exceptional. Kristen Peace as Countess Andrenyi; Brendan Wall as Monsieur Bouc; Kiana Woo as Mary Debenham; Martin Happer as Colonel Arbuthnot, Mary's love, and also as the gangster Samuel Ratchett; Pamela Mala Sinha as Princess Dragomiroff; Birgitte Solem as the princess's assistant, Greta Ohlsson; Mark Crawford as Hector McQueen, the gangster's associate; and Steven Gallagher as Michel the conductor.

I was sorry anyone had to get murdered because I wanted to see more of everyone. It's that kind of a staging. It has it all — hotness (the kissing between Mary and the colonel threatens to set off the A/C in the building); scrumptious plotting and twists that are played out with clarity and pace, not circuit board complexity, too often the bane of murder mysteries) and, perhaps rarest of all in the genre, memorably strong humour.

Examples. A flirting Hubbard to the conductor: "You remind me of one of my husbands. The next one."



Brendan Wall and Nora McLellan in "Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express."  
Dahlia Katz

I'll finish where I started, with the incredible "look" of the piece. The painterly lighting and sound (Mikael Kangas and Ranil Sonnadara, respectively); splendid costumery and other period touches, so apt and accurately presented, and, of course, that set — a brilliancy from Brandon Kleiman and his team.

Finally, and perhaps most notably, the conception and flawless execution of the whole enterprise, from the vision and deft handling of director Morris Panych.