

Review: 'Dial M for Murder' – suspense with a capital S

Erin Hunsader , Advocate correspondent 10:07 a.m. CDT July 11, 2015

Director Alfred Hitchcock was quoted as saying, "In films murders are always very clean. I show how difficult it is and what a messy thing it is to kill someone." And things get messy for Tony, the main character in the suspense-filled thriller "Dial M for Murder" as Peninsula Players' 80th season continues this summer.

Playwright Frederick Knott's best-known effort made its debut on Broadway in 1952, and Hitchcock turned it into a classic film two years later. While the play is decades old, it still has the power to bring people to the edge of their seats.

The time period is set in the theater before the show begins, with music from the 1950s playing as visitors find their seats. One glance at the set, and it's clear we're in a wealthy couples apartment.

But there's trouble in paradise, with the opening scene between Margot (Katherine Keberlein) and Max (Matt Holzfeind), revealing they are having an affair. As they debate whether or not to tell her husband, Tony (Jay Whittaker), he comes home unexpectedly.



Tony has grown accustomed to the lavish lifestyle made possible by his heiress wife, Margot. Convinced Margot is having an affair, Tony, begins a sinister scheme for her demise laced with treachery and blackmail. From left, Neil Friedman and Katherine Keberlein. Frederick Knott's taut thriller "Dial M for Murder" now on stage at Peninsula Players through July 26.

The charming Tony pretends to be naive of their affair and ever so casually asks Max to accompany him to a stag party on the following evening. Little does Max know the invitation is tied into Tony's plot to have Margot murdered. And while this scene is necessary to establish the relationships of the play, it does seem to drag a bit.

Things pick up when Tony is joined by Captain Lesgate (Neil Friedman), whom Tony is planning to hire to kill his wife. This scene is reminiscent of those great Hitchcock moments found in movies like "Strangers on a Train," where the devious villain makes the murder sound so easy. Lesgate isn't biting on Tony's plan, until he dangles a carrot in front of him dipped in blackmail. Then Lesgate sees he has no choice.

Whittaker is incredibly convincing and charming as the devious, plotting husband. There is even a moment when you wonder if he really did love Margot, although it becomes clear he loves her money even more. He fills in Lesgate on the details and reveals his perfect plan, but, like any good Hitchcock tale, one detail in the plan is missed and everything unravels from there.

The unraveling begins when Margot reveals that she is going to out on the night Tony has hired Lesgate to come kill her. This sends Tony into a "Frenzy," trying to offer her options to convince her to stay home, like enticing her with pasting his newspaper clippings from his famous tennis days into a scrapbook. She reluctantly agrees, and Tony thinks things are back on track. He leaves with Max and Margot heads to bed.

Hitchcock was "Notorious" for filming murder scenes, and Players director Joe Foust follows suit, with quite a convincing struggle between Margot and Lesgate that ends the first act with people holding on to the edge of their seats.

In Act Two we're introduced to Inspector Hubbard, played by Peninsula Players veteran Tim Monsion, whose portrayal of the inspector brings a comedic lightness to the show that keeps the suspense-filled ride moving at a brisk pace, as Hubbard and Max start to discover the key to how the murder happened. By the end there is no "Shadow of a Doubt" who the guilty party is.

Peninsula Players Theatre is at 4351 Peninsula Players Road, Fish Creek. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays and 7:30 p.m. Sundays, except for the closing performance at 4 p.m. July 26. Individual ticket prices are \$36 to \$45; discounts are available for season tickets and groups. For tickets or more information, call (920) 868-3287 or go to www.peninsulaplayers.com