

Peninsula Players' 'Dial M for Murder' thrives on precision

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FISH CREEK, Wis. (WFRV) – It seems all the cards are on the table in the photo above. Seems.

The Peninsula Players Theatre audience for Frederick Knott's thriller, "Dial M for Murder," has already been told that what is planned on paper doesn't always turn out that way in real life. Stuff happens. Over and over, the audience is the omniscient observer as stuff happens in this play – deliciously for those with a palate for suspense.

Has-been tennis star Tony Wendice, whose gifts for charm and calculation remain, has discovered his heiress wife has fallen out of love with him. Tony figures the lovely, gold-plated life style to which he has grown accustomed is about to vanish. But he could inherit his wife's wealth. And so by the start of the play, Tony has been busy weaving a web. The audience watches as Tony weaves some more and – oops, gosh darn – stuff happens to Tony's plans, and yet he nimbly escapes tight spots like the tennis player who returns "sure winner" with a behind-the-back shot.

All this takes place in a well-appointed apartment in London, England, starting in September 1955. "Dial M for Murder" is a period piece. All the men are nicely tailored with a '50s haberdasher-catalog look, with Tony especially natty (and actor Jay Whittaker having the glide of an athlete). Tony's wife, Margot, wears dresses befitting a woman of means of the time – nothing from the rack, mind you. The main period element is the telephone. It has a rotary dial of the time. More importantly, a letter is used for what was called an exchange in earlier days of the telephone. Long before cell phones came to be, dialing exchange letters to start a call went out of use. "Dial M" today means nothing. However, in this one instance, it serves as the set up for a great title that has lasting value in theater circles and film (notably the Alfred Hitchcock version) of "Dial M for Murder."

In a way, "Dial M for Murder" is archaic. What's left? Clever and intriguing writing is clever and intrigue writing. That always works. And Peninsula Players Theatre handles it meticulously. The acting is precise and done with a lightness of step – once the preparatory exposition for Tony's web weaving is in place.

Director Joe Foust has an exacting crew to work with. These folks have nuance and timing down, starting with Mr. Slick, Tony, by way of Jay Whittaker. Importantly, Foust's resumé includes fight choreography. "Dial M for Murder" includes an indelible scene that has to be pulled off. Foust et al do it so convincingly, this thought occurs afterward: How did they do that?

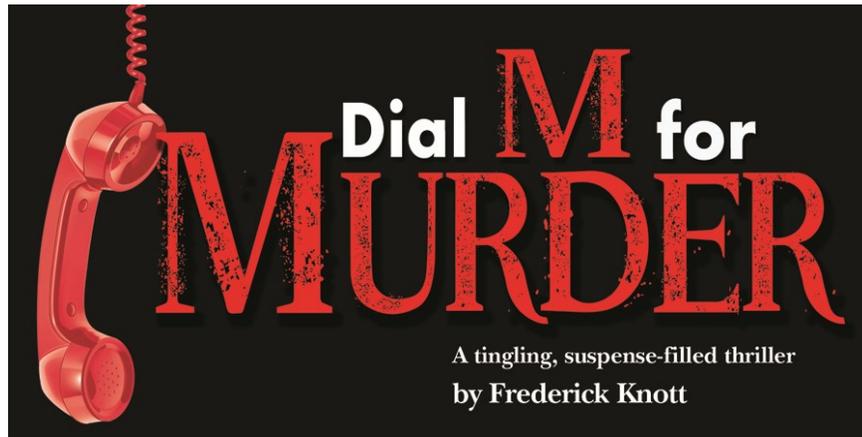


PHOTO: Peninsula Players Theatre actors Neil Friedman and Katherine Keberlein are all set for a dramatic scene in "Dial M for Murder." *Brian Kelsey photo*

Creative: Playwright – Frederick Knott; director – Joe Foust; scenic designer – Sarah E. Ross; costume designer – Karin Simonson Kopischke; lighting designer – Charles Cooper; sound designer – Rick Sims; production stage manager – Deya S. Friedman; properties designer – Jamie Karas; production manager – Sarah Burnham; scenic artist – April Beiswenger; artistic director – Greg Vinkler; managing director – Brian Kelsey.

Cast: In order of appearance: Margot Wendice – Katherine Keberlein; Max Halliday – Matt Holzfeind; Tony Wendice – Jay Whittaker; Captain Lesgate – Neil Friedman; Inspector Hubbard – Tim Monsion; Thompson – Peter Brian Kelly; Williams – Matt Super.

Running time: Two hours, 12 minutes



Theater necessity factors into this production in two ways to help the audience, I guess. When someone speaks into the telephone, the audience hears the person on the other end, too. In movies, they'd have an inset of the person being phoned. But this isn't a movie, and the audience can hear both sides of conversations. Also – miracle of miracles – the audience can see through a wall in this production. It's for comings and goings surrounding a doorway to the apartment. The audience sees who's up to what. So there's fudging in the production. The experience becomes about the clever and intriguing writing.

One of the fun parts of "Dial M for Murder" is likely to happen in each performance as the run continues to July 26, as they did on opening night Wednesday. Murmurs. Audience murmurs. The audience knows full well when somebody is lying or what the truth is of a situation, and a line is delivered and it murmurs the murmur of "Ah ha! Did you catch that?" Murmuring happens with regularity.

Also fun is the wordplay. As the police inspector, Tim Monsion has a way with a "Hmmm" as Tony says something remotely suspicious – and by starting sentences aimed at a particular person like a CANNON REPORT. Tony and a fellow named Captain Lesgate play a tight game of cat-and-mouse of Frederick Knott's making. And Knott lets loose a momentous line with layers of meaning that unravels Tony's Plan A to have his wife in the bedroom listening to a Saturday night theater program on the radio and learns she doesn't want to this week because, she says, "I don't like thrillers."

RELATED EVENTS: Backstage tours, 2 p.m. Sundays, July 12, Aug. 2, 9, 23, 30; post-show discussion, Wednesday, July 15. Info: (920) 868-3287.

REST OF SEASON: "Lend Me a Tenor" by Ken Ludwig, July 29-Aug. 16; "Outside Mullingar" by John Patrick Shanley, Aug. 19-Sept. 6; "Nonsense" by Dan Goggin, Sept. 9-Oct. 18.

THE VENUE: The location is about atmosphere – tall cedars and pines and shoreline vistas along the bay of Green Bay. The 621-seat Peninsula Players Theatre features Door County limestone in its interior décor. When the weather is friendly, the wood slats of the side walls are rolled open to the outside. For cool fall nights, the theater floor is equipped with radiant heating for comfort. While the company dates back 80 years, the theater building is of 2006 vintage. The playhouse and theater were built on the site of the previous structure. The location on the shores of Green Bay provides playgoers with pre-show picnicking and viewing the sunset. Here's a theatrical rarity: The Players' website provides sunset times.

Because I review performances that range from amateur to professional, and because production budgets range tremendously, I no longer use star ratings. You may email me at warren.gerds@wearegreenbay.com. Watch for my on-air segments on WFRV between 6 and 8 a.m. Sundays.