

# WHAT'S NEXT

THE NEWSLETTER OF NEXT ACT THEATRE

VOLUME 34, ISSUE 2  
NOV 2023

## A Christie for Christmas

A Conversation on Agatha Christie with Dr. Christopher Chan



worked for them on a whole lot of projects.

*Since THE MOUSETRAP was written by Christie as a play, not written as a novel and then adapted for the stage, how does it differ from her novels?*

It's important to realize that Christie's novels have been adapted to the stage since the 20s and 30s, but not always by her. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was adapted as *ALIBI*, for example. The problem was that she didn't really like a lot of these adaptations. She thought they were overcomplicated: it's a rare complaint for an author to say that playwrights are hewing too close to your original work, but she realized what was needed was simplification.

**Dr. Christopher Chan** lives in Milwaukee and is a graduate of Lawrence University. He earned a Master of Library and Information Science degree from UW-Milwaukee and a Ph.D. in U.S. history from Marquette University. He is also an International Goodwill Ambassador for Agatha Christie Ltd.: he writes, researches and conducts outreach on behalf of the organization. His expertise in all things Agatha Christie makes him a perfect subject matter expert for our next production, *THE MOUSETRAP*. We asked him a few questions to get to the bottom of the world's most famous mystery writer before the show opens.

*How did you first get interested in the works of Agatha Christie?*

It started on Christmas of Fifth Grade

for me. I received this beautiful, leatherbound copy of *And Then There Were None* from a relative. I started reading it [at school the next month] with no idea what to expect, and I started loving it. I read the book again and again, and pretty soon I started asking, "can I get some more Agatha Christie books?" By the September of my Seventh Grade year, I had read every Agatha Christie mystery novel.

Around the time I started my PhD, Agatha Christie Ltd. opened up a new website, and I started posting on the discussion board. I was able to answer a lot of questions that even the moderators weren't sure about. I was a regular presence on the board for years, and they asked me, "Chris, would you mind writing some articles on these topics?" Then, they came up with the title International Goodwill Ambassador, and since then, I've

She was a great experimenter. She was always altering things to see what worked and what didn't. All the time, she was trying different approaches and trying to do something that people wouldn't expect. It's interesting to see what she thought would work best theatrically.

*Why do we read crime and mystery books, or see thrilling and sometimes scary stories onstage, at the holiday time?*

In England, there's a long history of ghost stories at Christmas. Think about the song "It's The Most Wonderful Time of The Year" – there's a lyric about "scary ghost stories." Probably the most famous Christmas story of all, *A Christmas Carol*, has at least four ghosts in it. So, it's not all smiles and eggnog.

*THE MOUSETRAP* is sponsored by Jan Serr & John Shannon and Sandra Zingler



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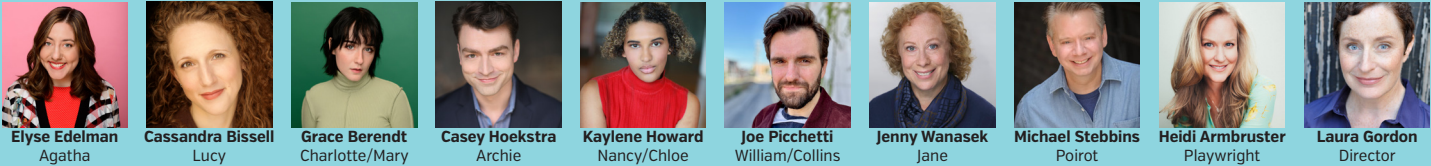
In 1926, famous author Agatha Christie disappeared for eleven days, setting a mystery in motion that remains unsolved. Nearly 100 years later, Lucy, an American detective fiction fan, stumbles upon a clue that just might solve Christie’s disappearance once and for all. This new comedy shifts back and forth across time to explore the woman behind the mysteries and prove that sometimes you need to disappear in order to find yourself.

Enjoy a one-night-only staged reading of this new play from **Heidi Armbruster**, playwright and performer of *SCARECROW* (on the Next Act stage later this season). Directed by **Laura Gordon** (also directing *SCARECROW*) and based on the life of *THE MOUSETRAP* playwright and grand dame of mystery **Agatha Christie**, *MRS. CHRISTIE* complements *THE MOUSETRAP* for a perfect holiday thriller double bill.

“FIZZES AND DIZZIES! Blazes with talent. Whet your inner Hercule Poirot.”– *San Francisco Chronicle*

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**What's Next** is a publication of Next Act Theatre

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A CHRISTIE FOR CHRISTMAS, continued

I think people find it a good thing to share with family. That’s why a number of adaptations have tried to release around Christmas. I think also, some of it is marketing. For most of the latter half of Christie’s career, her books came out around November or early December, and her publishers marketed it as “a Christie for Christmas.” The idea for all her fans was “get this book for your family and friends for Christmas.” So there’s always a connection there now.



Why have Agatha Christie’s works endured for so long?

There’s a number of reasons. She reaches out to so many people – of all ages, background, ethnicities, religions, walks of life. She doesn’t talk down to her readers; she challenges them. I think she hasn’t always gotten a lot of critical respect. It’s only been in recent years that there’s started a reevaluation of her work in terms of quality, style and innovation.

There’s an axiom in the publishing business: “when the author dies, the work dies.” That’s what’s happens with a whole lot of authors, especially mystery novelists. Look at the case of Erle Stanley Gardner, the creator of the Perry Mason books. For years, he was the best-selling author in America – he wrote over 100 novels and he was everywhere. He died in the early 1970s, and around 2000, his publisher put him out of print. It’s only recently that small presses have been re-releasing a handful of his books. Not even all of them are available as e-books now.

Dorothy L. Sayers and Anthony Berkeley [Cox] were some of the best of their time, and then they stopped writing mysteries for years before they died, so already, they were fading out of the public eye. Christie kept writing. She kept writing books for over 55 years and she kept a high level of quality. When you look at her books, they’re crafted well, they’re more innovative and they’re more surprising than a lot of others.

That’s one of the reasons that Agatha Christie Ltd. has been crucial to keeping Christie alive. It’s not “supposed” to happen like this. Someone like Agatha Christie isn’t “supposed” to be on the best-seller list or this much of a

common name half a century after she died, but she is. If we had a definitive explanation of why she kept on going, every publisher and author would try to get in on it, but there’s always a “lighting in the bottle” aspect to it.

What can people do to prepare themselves for THE MOUSETRAP? How can they immerse themselves further in Chrisite’s world?

Almost every Saturday night, PBS has an episode of [Agatha Chrisite’s] Poirot on; sometimes they’ve got a Miss Marple episode too during the week. They can find different movies and other adaptations on streaming services. They can always find something [from Christie] to read, too. Also, there are so many great either audiobooks or full dramatic radio adaptations. If people ever want to listen to Christie while they’re exercising or on their commute, they’ve got options.

What’s your favorite Agatha Christie book?

Of her novels, my favorite is probably the Poirot novel *Five Little Pigs*. Christie started getting really into “murder in retrospect” – about eight of her novels feature a detective looking into a murder that took place years and years ago. She was very interested in how an unsolved (or improperly solved) murder might have an effect on all the survivors, both the innocent ones and the guilty. It focuses on five suspects who all narrate the story twice, and they all give a slightly different version of events. That tells you so much about their characters and what they’re hiding. I think it’s got some of her best characterization, and it’s one of her richest and most interesting novels.

It also means a lot to me because it was the hardest of hers to find growing up. In America, all of her mystery novels were in print except for *Five Little Pigs* for a few years. For some fluke, it was out of print, so the fact that it was so hard to find meant a lot to me.

What else should people know before they go?

On a number of occasions, Agatha Christie ripped from the headlines. *THE MOUSETRAP* is inspired in part by a real-life tragedy that became a minor scandal.

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# Christie History

## The Long Journey of THE MOUSETRAP

by A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director

Even before coming to Next Act Theatre, Agatha Christie's THE MOUSETRAP already has a long and storied history. As the world's longest-running play, Christie's mystery has been actively running on London's West End during many major events of the last seven decades! Here's a timeline of some major milestones since the play was first written.

1947

Agatha Christie writes **THREE BLIND MICE**, a radio play broadcast on the BBC on May 30, 1947 in honor of Queen Mary's Birthday.

In America:  
Gas costs \$0.19/gallon  
Average house costs \$6,600.00  
A loaf of bread costs \$0.13

**THREE BLIND MICE** was adapted into a television short later that year, and in 1948, Christie adapted it into a short story.



1952

Agatha Christie expands **THREE BLIND MICE** into a full-length stageplay called **THE MOUSETRAP**. The new title of Christie's play was inspired by the "play-within-a-play" from William Shakespeare's **HAMLET**. The play premiered in October and toured for almost two months before opening on London's West End on **November 25, 1952**.



The original cast featured, among others, **Richard Attenborough** as Detective Sergeant Trotter.

1964

**THE MOUSETRAP** celebrates its 5,000<sup>th</sup> performance.

1962

10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **THE MOUSETRAP**.

The Beatles release "Love Me Do."



1957

**THE MOUSETRAP** breaks the record for the longest run of a play in the West End. Noël Coward, who wrote the previous longest-running play, **BLITHE SPIRIT**, sends Agatha Christie a telegram that reads "Much as it pains me I really must congratulate you..."



1955

**THE MOUSETRAP** celebrates its 1,000<sup>th</sup> performance.

"Alfred Hitchcock Presents" and "The Mickey Mouse Club" both debut.

1953

**THE MOUSETRAP** exceeds Agatha Christie's expectations. The author writes in her autobiography that she expected the play's run to only last eight months. As of August 1953, however, it was still successfully running.

1971

Agatha Christie receives her Damehood.

Walt Disney World opens.



1974

**THE MOUSETRAP** closes at the Ambassadors Theatre on London's West End. It opens one day later at the St Martin's Theatre on the West End, keeping its "initial run" status.



1976

Agatha Christie dies.

**THE MOUSETRAP** celebrates its 10,000<sup>th</sup> performance.

1982

30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **THE MOUSETRAP**.

The Falklands War begins. Michael Jackson releases *Thriller*.



1992

40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **THE MOUSETRAP**.

The European Union is founded.



2012

60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **THE MOUSETRAP**.

The 25,000<sup>th</sup> performance of **THE MOUSETRAP** takes place, featuring actors Patrick Stewart, Julie Walters, Hugh Bonneville and Iain Glen, among others.



2002

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **THE MOUSETRAP** occurs the same year as Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee. The monarch attends a special anniversary performance of the play.

2020

**THE MOUSETRAP** closes on London's West End due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2021

**THE MOUSETRAP** re-opens on London's West End after 14 months without performances.

2022

70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of **THE MOUSETRAP**.

*See How They Run* is released, set during the early run of **THE MOUSETRAP**.

2023

**THE MOUSETRAP** will open at Next Act Theatre on November 25, 2023, exactly 71 years after it opened on London's West End!



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# Splash Hit

by A.J. Magoon, Marketing Director

Jada Jackson and Malaina Moore in **SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN**  
Photo: Michael Brosilow

Next Act Theatre's 2023-24 season opened in September with **SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN** by Kia Corthron. Audiences were deeply engaged in the story brought to life on Next Act's stage - but audiences seeing the show is only half the story! We were glad to also offer a number of opportunities to deepen conversation and inspire additional thought about the many issues raised by Kia Corthron.

Throughout the run of **SPLASH HATCH**, a number of community organizations joined us as talkback guests. These organizations, including **African American Roundtable, Alice's Garden, Black Leaders Organizing for Communities, Habitat for Humanity, Milwaukee Riverkeeper, My Sista's KeepHer, Nearby Nature Milwaukee** and **Teens Grow Greens** viewed the show with our audiences and had the chance to respond with their thoughts on the topics of the play while also answering questions from the audience. Thank you to the many representatives of these organizations who joined us, and especially to those who returned multiple times to discuss the play or just to view it!

We also had our second-ever **Black Out Night** performance in late September. Last year, Next Act offered the first Black Out Night performance in Milwaukee theatre history, creating a space for an all-Black-identifying audience to view and discuss a performance of **KILL MOVE PARADISE** by James Ijames in a supportive environment. Our second event continued this success as a large crowd gathered to enjoy and discuss **SPLASH HATCH** along with food, a talkback with the cast and a joyous atmosphere.

Finally, during the last week of performances, we offered a school matinee performance of **SPLASH HATCH**. A full house of students from **Alexander Hamilton High School, Rufus King High School** and **Ronald Reagan IB High School** engaged deeply in the issues of the students and teens that they saw in the play. Students from Hamilton in particular delved even deeper into the issues of the play and explored the script in detail with Education Manager Pia Russo as part of our Community Youth Project. Students wrote letters to playwright Kia Corthron and scripts that continued the story of the play. "I loved the story. It was awesome, so I would like to say that you did a great job at making the story," wrote one student.

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# What Is Next Act Thankful For This Season?

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- Six new stage lights
- The United Performing Arts Fund
- A shiny, new printer
- Crunchy leaves
- Milwaukee!



- A successful run of *SPLASH HATCH ON THE E GOING DOWN*
- Our friends at Renaissance Theaterworks
- The coolest staff in town
- Our AMAZING Donors and Supporters
- Tom Darrow, the greatest Administrative Volunteer around
- Homemade pie!



- Sound Designer Josh Schmidt, who donated a "God Mic" to help us communicate backstage
- Agatha Christie
- The new faucet and coffee maker in the staff kitchen
- All of the amazing technicians who work on our stage
- YOU!



Riddles and Puzzles and Tricks,

Oh My!  
by Jim Toth,  
Curator

What is a *Who-Done-It* if not a puzzle? We are given the pieces bit by bit until we either figure out the whole picture on our own or are shown it in a big reveal. Either way, we are drawn into the game.

Born in 1890, I like to imagine a young Agatha Christie taking pleasure in the riddles and puzzles of her time. With her sharp literary- and mathematically-inclined mind, I picture her engaged by the clever wordplay of well-written riddles and sleuthing the answers to brainteasers and rebus puzzles. It may all be my fantasy, but those thoughts led me to what will be an unusual lobby gallery installation for *THE MOUSETRAP*.

A quick search of the National Archives rewarded me with source materials like 1904's *The Mother Goose Puzzle Book* and 1893's *The Star / Games, Tricks and Puzzles*. Popular publications of their time, these books, now in the public domain, are loaded with timelines, classic riddles and puzzles from the turn of the century from which I've selected representative examples to exhibit. Part of their charm lies in the use of terms and idioms long lost to our modern world, and the illustrations... well, you will just have to come see for yourself.



**Come See Jim's Gallery**

Enjoy the art in our lobby gallery during the run of *THE MOUSETRAP*, Nov. 22 through Dec. 17 from noon to 5 p.m. or before/after performances.







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*"A masterpiece... Of all the stage versions of Christie's books, THE MOUSETRAP is by far the best."*

-The Chicago Tribune

**Nov. 22 - Dec. 17, 2023**

Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
			22 Preview 7:30	Thanks- giving	24 Preview 7:30	25 Opening 4:00
26 2:00 T			29 1:30 7:30	30 7:30 T	1 7:30	2 4:00 7:30
3 2:00 P/T			6 1:30 7:30	7 7:30 T	8 7:30	9 4:00 7:30
10 2:00 P/T	11 PWYC 7:30		13 7:30	14 7:30 T	15 7:30	16 4:00 7:30
17 2:00 Closing	P - Personal Preview T - Talkback PWYC - Pay What You Can					

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