

# 'This is not your grandmother's

By JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO  
Sight & Sound Editor

**BENTON HARBOR** — The morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Peter Meineck and his Aquila Theatre Company were rehearsing their production of "Much Ado About Nothing" at 45 Bleecker Street in lower Manhattan when the planes hit the towers.

"We were blocks away from ground zero," Meineck says by phone from New York University, where he is now a full-time professor in the classics department. "We saw it all. It was very traumatic. ... We closed the show, but we were the first downtown show back up just two days after 9/11, and we continued on. That experience made me realize about the power of art in those moments — that people really crave particularly classic works that have some continuity with the past to get them through these kind of moments of real tension."

When Meineck, who founded Aquila Theatre in London in 1991, was asked to direct the company's 25th anniversary production of Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile," he couldn't help but reflect on that moment when he uncovered that Christie had adapted her 1937 novel, "Death on the Nile," into its theatrical version during the darkest days of World War II.

"She was working at University Hospital during the Blitz, and that's when she adapted the novel," Meineck says. "I felt a connection with it both as a piece of comedy but also as a way of showing audiences something about the history of Aquila. That's when it occurred to me. What would happen if there was a BBC radio play during the Blitz and two actors had made it in, and the air raid happens and nobody else comes into the recording studio except the BBC tea lady? These three people are dominated by the on air sign, and suddenly they realize they've got to do this play. You've got the murder mystery, but you also have got this question of how are these actors going to do this? It was a crazy idea, but that's Aquila. That's what we do."

What might have been a lighthearted dip into the tried-and-true genre of murder mystery instead becomes a plunge into the depths in Aquila Theatre's production of "Murder on the Nile," which will play Friday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Aquila Theatre Company presents Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile"

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday

**Where:** Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

**How much:** \$26-\$48

**Contact:** 927-1221 or themendelcenter.com

**Artist info:** www.aquilatheatre.com

On the surface, there's Christie's whodunit. A famous heiress boards a paddle steamer with her broke husband, and stirs up excitement, rumors and murderous intentions among the other passengers. Lurking underneath is the setting of the BBC Home Service studios in London during an air raid. The air raid has prevented most of the cast members from making it to the radio studio in time for the live broadcast, so the three who are there must pick up the slack.

Three cast members — Lincoln Hudson, Palmyra Mattner and Toby Miller — combine to play the 13 roles (eight men and five women) in this production of "Murder on the Nile." While some scenes only have two or three characters, others have four or five, meaning the actors need to quite literally change hats back and forth to keep up.

"Each character (of the radio play) has a chair with their name by it," Meineck says. "It's sort of these empty chairs because those actors haven't shown up, but it also helps the audience know that they are changing character. Each actor has a hat and they literally change hats, which itself is a joke on the idea of wearing many hats. ... What it means is that they are constantly working. By now most shows would be in its groove and you show up and do your bit, but they pretty much have to do a full rehearsal before every show because it's not just their lines, but all the movements and characterizations. There's an enormous amount of work, and they work very hard."

Many of the 13 characters also are played by not one, but all three cast members at different times, challenging each actor to embody that character with the same mannerisms and accents as the other two. As



Lincoln Hudson, from left, Palmyra Mattner and Toby Miller (both also on the cover) perform a scene from Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile" at Connecticut State University in Danbury, Conn. The play will be staged Friday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

the radio play develops, it morphs into its own surreal world, complete with projections that transform the BBC studio into Christie's Nile.

"The projections really act as a window on the atmosphere of the show," Meineck says. "We wanted to use that as a deep visual element. Even though we are in a recording studio, the atmosphere of what we are doing on stage can sort of change the environment. We always try to do some-

thing new and fresh, and it gave the whole thing a theatrical exuberance."

Emphasizing Aquila's fresh takes on classic works seems particularly important this year, as the company celebrates its 25th anniversary. After all, the initial impetus for Aquila was to make these works accessible to the masses during a time when classical theater felt anything but.

"A lot of us felt that classical theater in Britain at the time was a very rarified item,

# Agatha Christie'

*Aquila Theatre Company puts an unlikely twist on 'Murder on the Nile'*



Photo provided / Richard Termine

ne in Aquila Theater's production of Agatha Christie's "Murder on the Nile" on Aug. 27 at Western College Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

or it was produced as a star vehicle," Meineck says. "It was becoming very genteel or so aesthetic that the story was getting lost. We really wanted to explore these stories. We were working class kids who were lucky enough to go to university. I came out of the (British Royal) Marines and went to university. We all came from these different backgrounds, and we all had something to say. It was a little bit of rebellion for us to say, why can't we do them, too? I always

wanted to do these plays for regular people, and we found an audience pretty quickly."

The company also found an audience in the United States, relocating to New York City in 1999.

"We broke a lot of rules," Meineck says. "In our early days we were sort of the naughty school boys of classical theater and New York loved us for that. As we've grown up, I think we've found more depth in our work."

"Murder on the Nile" is the latest example of that. Although Christie's play may seem trite to modern audiences, Meineck says actually it's brimming with social commentary.

"I admire her as a mystery writer, and when I read the play, what really struck me were the characters," he says. "There's gender issues, class issues. You often wonder is this really the murderer? Is this really what happened? She was one of the first really commercially successful women writers, writing in a very male, class-driven world. She didn't grow up in that world so she is sort of commenting on it. You can miss that sometimes, but it's there in the work. There's a reason why her stories endure."

As a nod to both Christie, and those caught up in Germany's Blitz of Britain, Meineck has added one dose of realism that plays throughout the production. The "da-da-da-dum" timpani sound is from an actual BBC wartime broadcast. The rhythm is Morse code for the letter "V" and was known as the "V for victory" signal. It was broadcast several times a day on the BBC as a morale booster for both the embattled British and occupied Europeans, who embraced the theme as a beacon of resistance to Nazi tyranny.

"Britain in 1941, everything was lost. Britain was on its own. America wasn't in the war yet, and Nazis were everywhere," Meineck says. "So this musician came up with this idea of communicating the Morse code of V for victory. The BBC was used to transmit signals to the French resistance, but also to kind of stop and give people a moment of hope. It's kind of a lonely sound, but on the other hand it's also this sound of hope. It became kind of this real rallying cry, but it's quite ominous as well. So I love having this in the background, and see the actors on stage as their BBC radio characters sort of respond to the sound. ... It brought me back to performing at 45 Bleecker Street on 9/11. You are performing and every now and again you hear those sirens and it kind of stops everything for a second, and you kind of re-orientate yourself back to the show."

Meineck pauses, then lets out a gentle, knowing laugh.

"I suppose you could say," he adds, "this is not your grandmother's Agatha Christie."

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Founder, Aquila  
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