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## Written Adjudication – Barnet & District Drama Festival

***TFAHETGDS –Murder Mystery*** by David Mc Gillivray & Walter Zerlin Jnr

# East Lane Theatre Club

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# Background

This revised version of the play, from 1988, pre-dates ‘The Play That Goes Wrong’ and all its offspring by almost 30 years and shows that Mc Gillivray and Zerlin had, and developed, the idea of disasters on-stage first. Maybe, it can be argued, in an even better form. ‘Murder Mystery’ (or ‘Murder at Checkmate Manor’, as it was originally titled) is one of a series of plays concerning the fictional Farndale Avenue Housing Estate Townswomen's Guild Dramatic Society. Each play is a production by the Society of a famous work or a parody example of a popular genre, filtered through the ladies' unique blend of misplaced enthusiasm, ego, inappropriate casting, and bad acting.

Various members of the Dramatic Society appear in multiple productions, each time playing a different role. They include Mrs Reece, the president of the Society; Thelma, a quick-tempered prima donna who always insists on playing ‘The Ingenue’ and Felicity, a nervous young woman often cast as confident larger-than-life characters.

The first of the series, The Farndale Avenue Housing Estate Townswomen's Guild Dramatic Society's Production of Macbeth, debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1976.

Farndale plays are not to be undertaken lightly, it is very difficult to do bad theatre well. Actors must have excellent timing skills, understanding that the comedy comes from the situation and the lines and resisting the temptation to ham-up performances in search of extra laughs. This is particularly true in this play. We have to believe that the actors playing the Farndale group are experiencing the disasters, mistakes and forgotten lines for the first time and their reactions should be real and not appear rehearsed. The Director has to work out how to separate the housewives and Gordon from the characters in Murder Mystery and how they react to the often-insurmountable challenges facing them during their show, both in and out of character.

# Stage Presentation

### Set

The play needs a set that allows all the stage directions to be followed, all the humour to be mined. You did a wonderful job and rose to that challenge to great effect. The chessboard floor was an inspired idea, reflecting the Checkmate Manor location. There was much to admire in the set, from the not-quite-right and, perhaps, hand-printed wallpaper, the silver foil mirror, the view through the window (which opened and closed) giving us two mismatched garden posters and the bead curtains at the top of the stairs with a life of their own. All the practical parts of the set operated; the bannister broke, pelmets fell, a curtain tore, the flat fell and was turned upside down, chair backs separated, paintings fell and the bell pull detached. So, congratulations to the stage team for bringing us a faithful version of the writers’ setting.

### Costume/Props

It was obvious that a lot of thought and time had gone into the costumes, a crucial part of the show. Particularly delightful and very appropriate was Mrs Reece’s opening, quiz and fashion show outfit. Absolutely spot on for this character, adding to her portrayal and making her so believable. Then Thelma in her green (cocktail?) dress complete with Miss Farndale sash, again adding something to the character’s story. While I might suggest that O’Reilly’s costume could have been a little more over the top, it cannot be denied that his headgear on his first entrance gained a worthy laugh. Maybe an ill-fitting suit might have given us a touch more humour. It was interesting to see that you had changed Joan’s costume. The script puts her in tweeds but I think your choice of a typical archaeologist’s look worked very well and immediately told us who she was. Worthy of special mention and getting one of the biggest laughs of the evening was Mrs Castle’s cook crossed with sumo outfit. Then we had the fashion show; almost sticking to the script with wildly incorrect outfits but each beautifully thought out, especially Audrey’s 60’s go-go girl in place of the 30’s costume suggested by the writers. Finally, Felicity’s string bag accessory integral to her outfit but well concealed and also gaining a big laugh from the audience. Equally, the various wigs worked well. I loved that at their first entrance, Violet and Rose wore grey wigs but on their next entrance had other characters’ black wigs on. All the costumes, with my one minor observation about the Inspector, worked perfectly and the costume team must be congratulated.

This is a play top heavy with props and as with the costumes the props team did a brilliant job. There is not room to list all the props but worthy of special mention must be; the telephone without a cable, the dummy piano accordion, the fake sherry glass, cheap cups stuck to a tray, the sewing box, the embroidery, the bomb package complete with long lead and the ‘amateur’ wheelchair. I will make one observation though. The writers tell us that the two suitcases, used by all arrivals, are red and for a very good reason. For the joke, that there are only two suitcases, to work, the cases must be visually outstanding. The two cases used were not sufficiently exceptional or in fact large enough for the audience to see that you only used the same two throughout.

Make-up

Most amateur productions these days don’t invest a lot of time or indeed money in stage make-up; women tend to wear street make-up and men rarely bother, unless the script calls for it, horror or supernatural works for example. In this show you might have ‘missed a trick’ and kept with the amateurish Farndale style. Gordon, for example, not usually seen on stage might have gone a little overboard with the Leichner, as many amateurs did back in those days. Thelma, too full of her own ability, also may have overdone her make-up; too much emphasis on her eyes for instance. I offer this observation purely from experience of amateur theatre in the later 1900’s.

### Sound and Lighting

The script suggests that there are more than 30 sound cues and it sounded to me that you delivered all of them. The sound levels were always precise, with cues either loud when they needed to be or just perceptible in the background. You delivered exactly the SFX required and in particular I enjoyed the traffic noise for only one vehicle arriving, the scratched sound effects record, the lift gates and the car over the cliff. All were accurately cued or not, of course, when needed.

The script lists 36 lighting cues and again, with some slight variations, all looked to be included. The set was well lit with no unintentional shadows or cold spots. The business with the light switch was timed perfectly gaining a good laugh. All the snap blackouts needed for comic effect arrived exactly on cue.

Well done to the technical crew.

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# Production – Danny Popkin

The only way to produce this play is to follow the script, follow exactly the stage directions and the sound and lighting cues. To do it any way would be to risk losing so much of the comedy. So I was relieved to see that Danny had understood that fact and put the play onto the stage intact.

From the moment the audience arrive at the theatre, we are in Farndale Land. The cast photos, complete with Sylvia Frobisher, adorn the wall inside the entrance. The programme supports the illusion, with a welcome to the Farndale team from the Chairman. Followed by a welcome from Mrs Reece complete with upcoming events and notes. We get bios of Mrs Reece and the cast and we are given Phoebe Reece’s name as Director and Gordon as SM. I felt that these clever little touches really enhanced our enjoyment of the evening. A big well done to the programme designer.

The Director had obviously worked hard with his cast. During the rehearsal process the actors have to find not only the Farndale people but then take those people onto the stage as characters in the play within a play. How would that actor (Phoebe, Thelma etc) play all their roles? Success was reflected in the strength of the performances. Each actor had created their Farndale cast member to make them believable with their individual personalities and character traits. Once the play is underway we saw their different attempts at ‘acting’ as they tried to differentiate between their doubled roles with strangled accents, clichéd mannerisms and silly walks.

I will make one observation though. Many times as the play unfolded the Farndale actors resorted to coming out of character to ask for cues or comment on a prop being early or chastise one and other for mistakes. At times it was not easy to understand that was happening as the lines were delivered at the same volume as the lines before and after. What could have been very funny was devalued a little. If only those lines had all been delivered ‘sotto voce’, maybe an exaggerated stage whisper, they would have been even funnier.

Pace

The humour was definitely there, cue pick up, when needed, was crisp or when not needed was well timed. Entrances and exits and comedy business all seemed played at a good speed. However I felt for much of the evening overall pace was lacking a little. That may have impacted on the audience enjoyment, where some laughs or reactions were not as strong as they might have been and some jokes missed altogether. What may have been lacking was energy and attack. The cast knew their lines and their moves but perhaps weren’t giving them 100%. I am not saying that they were just ‘going through the motions’, because that wasn’t the case but I would have liked to feel that there was more energy behind the performances. Experience tells me that such performance nights are not unusual so maybe I picked the wrong night to attend.

Movement

As I said above for this play to work, stage directions need to be followed and they absolutely were, direction after direction. Having said that I was still left thinking that more could have been added, without detracting from the comedy but actually increasing. One regular comment from Adjudicators is around unnecessary moves, an actor moves for no reason other than not staying in one place. Quite often in an overly dramatic fashion believing that the move will enhance the lines and the drama. It doesn’t. In this play I felt that we didn’t get enough of that. We saw Letitia use the stage well for a lovely dramatic entry and she wandered all over the place. There were many opportunities for other characters to make similar dramatic moves when they should have been staying in one place. So when in the denouement O’Reilly and Pawn make their ridiculous and obvious use of the chessboard floor, I was left wondering why we had not previously seen more over the top moves in keeping with the Farndale level of amateur theatre. As that is only my opinion I will balance it by saying that the cast used the stage well, taking the action back and forth. All acting areas were put to good use. Much use was made of the upstage and particularly around the windows. Actors leaning out and almost inaudible. We felt that the stairs may have been a cause for concern as the cast cleverly took extra care when exiting and entering. I was also pleased to see a few, preventable, straight lines of characters across the centre. Adjudicators hate straight lines and it greatly amused me to see them so accurately depicted here.

Groupings

Given that the play is supposed to be enacted haphazardly, the stage never looked untidy at the wrong time. Actors were only masked or upstaged when they needed to be or found themselves in the way of others. It would be wrong to critique stage groupings in this play, for obvious reasons.

# Acting

### **Mrs Reece played by Yvonne Worth**

(also played Clarissa, Regine, Patricia, Letitia and Goodbody)

The much-used cliché about being born to play a part really works here. Mrs Reece was a delightful creation. From the moment she entered the auditorium to ‘work the audience’ with her own fudge, complete with cellophane wrappers she cut up herself, we were obviously in the presence of the Chair of the F.A.H.E.T.G. Then, her interaction with Thelma was full of tension giving us an insight into backstage rivalry. A quick change later and Mrs Reece became Clarissa who briefly entertained us before her early demise, having to strangle herself a she missed getting into position close to the curtained arch. Mrs Reece monopolised the show taking on five different roles, all equally badly performed, as they should have been. From Regine’s awful French accent to Patricia’s unnecessary clip clopping around the stage, Patricia who definitely hadn’t learnt her lines. Then the wonderfully over the top Letitia and then the not quite in full costume Mr Goodbody, again lacking in lines or even knowing the character’s name. Moments to treasure include Regine’s ‘murder’ as Mrs Reece has to be assisted through the window to her ‘death’, Mrs Reece gamely carrying on her narration of the fashion show even though her descriptions are clearly incorrect and Regine’s final real totally over the top death to close the play. Yvonne clearly understood the demands of this character and her dramatic roles and played throughout with a firm control.

### **Thelma played by Marianne Daboudet**

(also played Daphne and Rose)

Thelma is clearly after the top job, Chair of the F.A.H.E.T.G., and her disdain of the current chair was beautifully evident throughout. Beginning with their exchanges before the curtain went up and carried on subtly as Thelma took on Daphne and Rose. (I am sure her Gladys Knight would have been memorable, had she made it onto the stage) Daphne was a glorious creation. Her first entrance with tennis racket set up the character very well as she immediately forgot her lines and fainted dramatically. Thelma tried to rise above the amateurs surrounding her by resolutely staying in character trying to be a pro. But letting herself down by inflicting pain on others when they went off the script or corpsed. Her anger at Gordon as their “it still hurts” exchange fails to move on from the same page was hilarious. Showing that despite her own belief in her ability she was just as much an amateur as the others. Highlighted again when at the beginning of Act II Rose is pushing the wheelchair instead of being seated. Rounding off Daphne’s character was a well wide of the mark attempt at a posh accent, landing somewhere nearer Holland than Roedean school. She ends the play barely able to disguise her reaction to the new pages of script handed out be Mrs Reece. Although Rose has less to do in the plot, Thelma (Marianne) created another wonderfully clichéd performance, her Yorkshire accent going and coming, as again she fails to be the pro she thinks she is, gamely carrying on as Thelma searches for a lost contact lens.

### **Audrey played by Fiona Couch**

(also played Lady Doreen, Joan, Violet and Mrs King)

The most important observation that can be made about Audrey is, ‘what a trooper’.

Fiona’s Audrey worked hard to be a professional in all her roles despite the chaos around her most of the time. As Lady Doreen, stoically waiting for entrances or lines but sadly failing during the sherry discussion with O’Reilly where they both corpse and then, finding her embroidery sewn to her skirt, had to exit to avoid more giggling. As the play progressed Fiona’s attempts at professionalism petered out as her giggling took over and finally she failed to disguise her contempt at Ms Reece producing a revised script. Fiona also showed us a fine display of physical comedy, for example, in the will reading scene where lacking a chair she has to mime being seated.

An all too brief appearance as Joan showed wonderful timing on her lines dismissing an early appearance by the spade before declaring that she would be perfectly safe out at the ruins. Swiftly back on the stage as Violet we had a lovely double act with Thelma as Rose. Violet blissfully unaware the wheelchair has its brakes on as she attempts to push her sister onto the stage. Leading to one of the funniest moments when in the middle of a full-on mangling of the Yorkshire accent she drops completely out of character at the loss of a contact lens. Finally, trapped on the stage she has to ad lib a line about just going to bed so the sisters can rush off minus wheelchair. Audrey’s last role is Mrs King in a scene where entrances, exits and props cues are gloriously mistimed. However Audrey tries to stay in character and help keep the scene on track, failing, of course. I admired Fiona’s clever portrayal of Fiona and others as she tried and failed to be the only professional in the team.

**Felicity played by Sue O’Connell**

(also played Pawn, Mrs Castle and Mr King)

Felicity might have thought she had the easy role, only Pawn for most of the play. A brief entrance as Mrs Castle the cook (and I am pleased that the extra scene was inserted or we would have been denied such a funny costume) but then finding that doubling roles is actually the route to more chaos, when Pawn and Mr King are needed pretty much simultaneously.

The Dramatic Society, obviously short of men requires Felicity to take on the Butlers role and she does so but without giving it much depth. Felicity enters and exits, picks up her cues and attempts to murder various members of the family. She stands with poise but little else in Felicity’s performance as Pawn shows a competent actor at work. That is the secret, I felt, to the cleverness of Sue’s portrayal of Felicity. Workmanlike. Only falling apart when required to make alternate entrances as Pawn and Mr King in the same scene without the time offstage to change clothes and moustache. While at the same time having to cope with the repercussions of bringing on the tea tray too early in the scene. Sue handled that difficult scene with great precision and timing, the laughs never abating.

Felicity tries to make her other roles distinct, giving us however a Mrs Castle just this side of coarse acting and Mr King a totally stock character.

There was much to enjoy in Sue’s role. Such as, gamely ignoring the early reveal, by accident, that Pawn is the killer. Her completely chaotic murder of Regine. Calmly restarting a phone call having forgotten to dial first and then picking up the receiver after the call has ended just to say goodbye. Worthy of the laughter it received, a beautiful piece of physical comedy with the phone and standard lamp. Then, her all too brief doubling for Mrs Reece as Letitia to play her death scene, deliberately way over the top but ruined by her automatic response to the dog bark.

All is revealed at the end as we find the motivation for Felicity’s participation, Pawn’s dramatic suicide. Her portrayal of Felicity at that point, denied her death scene and having to leave before the play has ended, showed us the real depth of this actor’s skill.

**Gordon played by Jack Goulde**

Poor Gordon, forced on to the stage to replace the injured Sylvia, when all he wants to do is stage manage. Little did they realise that putting their SM on stage would cause such chaos backstage. Gordon, not an actor by any stretch of the imagination, does his best throughout but never quite gets under the skin of the policeman, an easy solid stock character, mostly playing himself. Gordon had some wonderfully funny moments, all cleverly underplayed demonstrating that this character wouldn’t know how to go over the top, even if he tried. As mentioned above the scene with Daphne and “..it still hurts” was so reminiscent of real amateur theatre (it genuinely happened to me once) as Gordon weak on his lines repeatedly pick up on a cue with the wrong line and fails to get ‘off the page’. I enjoyed Gordon’s handling of the broken chair back, keeping a straight face holding the back while trying to juggle a cup and saucer and remember his lines. Finally he completely fluffs his lines for the denouement, forgetting that Gladys Knight had been left out and having to ask for help with his next lines. Jack tackled that scene with great skill. Probably the highlight of Jack’s portrayal of Gordon was his delivery of his one line at the end of the fashion show. A simple line but loaded with contempt and anger.

# Dramatic Achievement

This play is one that can easily be performed badly but not intentionally badly. It can become laboured and give lazy actors the excuse to fall back on the lines and stage directions to get laughs without putting much effort into giving the audience a good experience. So, I am pleased to say that this wasn’t the case with East Lane. A lot of rehearsal time had clearly been put into finding the characters of the Farndale team and then their portrayal of the cast of their chosen play. The set was perfectly realised and all the practical tricks worked a treat. Lighting and sound couldn’t be faulted. Costumes and props contributed solidly to the amateur feel of the Farndale play as well. I enjoyed being a member of the audience, only wishing I felt more energy from the stage and wondering if some more humour could have been found in sending up other amateur theatrical faux pas.

### Keith Phillips

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