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The Max Showalter Center for Education in Musical Theatre
Audience Insights

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Audience Insights for Something’s Afoot was prepared by Joshua S. Ritter, M.F.A, Education & Library Director and Christine Hopkins, M.A, Education & Library Assistant
ACT I
In the Spring of 1935, at Lord Dudley Rancour’s English country estate, his servants, Clive, Lettie, and Flint prepare for the arrival of six guests. Shortly after their arrival, Hope Langdon, Dr. Grayburn, Nigel Rancour, Lady Manley-Prowe, Colonel Gillweather, and Miss Tweed, are informed that there is a storm coming and the estate has become inaccessible to outsiders due to an incoming storm. Clive continues to inform them that the electricity may go out, Lord Rancour is dead, and that dinner is served.

Suddenly, the staircase explodes and Clive is killed. The guests are surprised that Clive wasn’t Lord Rancour’s murderer and Miss Tweed becomes the leader of the group. Doctor Grayburn finds Rancour’s body, announces that he was shot, and that the gun is missing.

In a panic, the men leave the scene to check the bridge and confirm that the island is inaccessible. The women begin a search to check the estate for potential dangers.

A disheveled college student named Geoffrey arrives at the mansion through the storm. The women, deeming him a potential danger, seize him, tie him up, and interrogate him. The men return and are surprised by Geoffrey’s presence. Looking for the missing gun, the stranger is patted down and a starting pistol for a rowing competition is found in his pack. Nigel takes the gun, points it at the stranger, and shoots. The gun fires but it is loaded with blanks so it is determined that Geoffrey is not a danger to the rest of the guests.

The guests decide to call for help, but they find that all of the telephone cords in the house have been cut with Flint’s garden sheers. To their surprise, the telephone on the wall rings. As Doctor Grayburn answers the phone, a mysterious gas is released from the receiver and Grayburn is instantly killed.

Geoffrey and Hope are left alone and appear to have developed feelings for each other. Nigel confronts Lady Manley-Prowe about a letter pleading for money that he found from her addressed to Lord Rancour. She explains that she was married to Lord Rancour but they were divorced after she had an affair with an army lieutenant named Shirley. Lady Manley-Prowe then joins Nigel in search of Rancour’s will, which supposedly lists the legal heir to his money and estate.

Colonel Gillweather joins them and Lady Manley-Prowe tries to distract him from the search for Lord Rancour’s will. In her efforts to distract him, Lady Manley-Prowe discovers that Colonel Gillweather is Shirley, her long-lost love, and the two happily reunite. Lady Manley-Prowe informs Colonel Gillweather that they had a child together but Rancour took the child as his heir.

Meanwhile, the group has come back together and Geoffrey has discovered a gun on Clive’s corpse. Miss Tweed examines all the details and clues, but she is now under suspicion because she has made numerous conclusions about what has been going on in the estate. The electricity suddenly goes out and when Lady Manley-Prowe attempts to turn on the light, she is electrocuted to death.

ACT II
Flint manages to use a generator to restore the mansion’s electricity. The survivors go to examine the generator but Nigel stays to continue his search for Lord Rancour’s will. He finds the will in a corked bottle, removes it, and reads. Nigel discovers that he is not his uncle’s heir. A sconce then falls on his head and he dies. Gillweather finds Nigel’s corpse and the will. He begins to read the will but is shot with a poisonous dart. Gillweather, familiar with the poison from his travels, notes that he has five minutes to live. With some struggle, he gives Tweed Rancour’s will, which reveals that Hope is the legal heir.

Panic spreads as the body count increases. The surviving guests make a plan to flee the estate as soon as they can. While the others pack their belongings...
and prepare to leave, Hope expresses her joy in finding a man like Geoffrey and narrowly escapes being killed by a falling chandelier.

As Lettie turns on the gas stove to make herself some tea, Flint proposes that the two of them take his boat to escape the island. She accepts his offer and Flint goes to find the oars. While waiting for him, Lettie finds a note in her pocket saying that Lord Rancour’s money is hidden in a Ming vase. Lettie approaches the vase, leans over to look inside, and disappears into it. One of her shoes is spit out.

The remaining survivors find Lettie’s remains along with the letter that she was reading. After discovering her shoe, Flint lights a match and takes out his pipe. He goes to the kitchen to finish the tea, gets too close to the gas stove, and creates an explosion which instantly kills him. Since Flint’s death was purely accidental, Miss Tweed concludes that the killer must have been...

Did you figure it out yet?
You’ll have to wait to see if you’re right!

“SOMETHING’S AFOOT IS A MASH-UP”
by James McDonald and Robert Gerlach

A mash-up is a mix, a combination of genres. For example, take a well-known plotline like a murder mystery from the famed writer of such stories, Agatha Christie, then add 1930s English music hall-type songs and liberally lace the play with satirical, funny, over-the-top comedy, and you have a mash-up. You have Something’s Afoot.

The British do mash-ups all the time. Recent examples are the brilliant re-workings for the stage of Hitchcock’s famous thriller, The 39 Steps, and of Noel Coward’s classic romantic film, Brief Encounter.

When we first wrote Afoot we were told “You can’t have a musical that’s a murder mystery. The two don’t mesh.” That proved to be the fun thing we loved about writing the show: to mash-up the classic drawing room setting of a mystery with music hall numbers sung by a cast of stereotypical characters — the butler, the maid, the colonel, the grande-dame, the amateur detective, etc. — and all of it performed on one set that proved to be the real star of the show.

Without giving too much away, when the characters enter the Grand Entrance Hall of Rancour’s Retreat, they are singing and dancing their way into an incredible booby trap!

WHODUNIT? Here’s a hint — it wasn’t the butler.
CHARACTERS

LETTIE

HOPE LANGDON

FLINT

MISS TWEED

GEOFFREY

DR. GRAYBURN

CLIVE

NIGEL RANCOUR

HOPE LANGDON

LADY GRACE MANLEY-PROWE

Photo Credits: (from left top to bottom) Liz Pearce, Julia Osborne, Hunter Ryan Herdlicka, Ed Dixon, Khris Lewin, Audrie Neenan, Peter Van Wagner, Ron Wisniski, Benjamin Eakeley, Lynne Wintersteller. Photos by Diane Sobolewski.
MEET THE WRITERS

JAMES McDONALD, DAVID VOS, ROBERT GERLACH (Book, Music and Lyrics) James McDonald and Robert Gerlach have been affiliated with numerous theatres in New York. Together they wrote the White House fable, Ladies First; the comedy, Private Parts; a contemporary musical version of Sheridan’s The Critic; and Moliere - the Musical, which covers the five years when Moliere’s masterpiece, Tartuffe, was banned. As an actor, McDonald toured extensively in Fiddler on the Roof, and played Motel in Fiddler on Broadway. He was also featured in the original company of Fortune and Men’s Eyes. Gerlach was the Mute in three tours of The Fantasticks all over the country, and he appeared on Broadway in Neil Simon’s Plaza Suite for almost two years. Both he and McDonald appeared in New York and on tour in the Circle in the Square production of John Webster’s The White Devil, and McDonald was also the producer of the acclaimed New Play Series at the Promenade Theatre. Gerlach had prominent roles in the films Milk and Money and Trifling with Fate.

The late David Vos, before his untimely passing, wrote the children’s show, Nobody Loves a Dragon with Gerlach and became a well-known theatre personality in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He formed his own theatre troupe, “Vos Happening?” and starred in productions of How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying and Man of La Mancha.

ED LINDERMAN (Additional Music) has the distinction of having worked both on and off-Broadway in three capacities: performer (Fiddler On The Roof, the original Broadway company and The New York Shakespeare Festival’s Rock Opera Two Gentlemen of Verona), composer/author (Something’s Afoot and Broadway Jukebox), and musical director (Godspell, Scrambled Feet, The Upstairs at the Downstairs, and Ionescopade) to mention just a few of his shows. His other Broadway musical scores include The Zimmer Girls, A Girl Singer, and most recently, Fragrant Harbour. He wrote the score for the NBC Emmy Award winning Children’s Television Special, “The Maltese Unicorn.” His career began at Chicago’s famous Second City and he was described in the New York Daily News as “a walking encyclopedia of the hidden treasures of the Broadway Musical.” He has taught at Penn State, Shenandoah and Northwestern Universities, Interlochen, and AMDA. Mr. Linderman is an active member of The Dramatists Guild, Actors Equity, AGVA, and an alumnus of the BMI-Lehman Engel Musical Theatre Workshop. For many years he has been a professional vocal coach in New York City, and many of his students are now working on Broadway. He is now legally married to his lifelong partner of 42 years, Sandy Levitt, and Ed will forever be grateful to Jim, Rob & David for asking him to collaborate on writing the music for Something’s Afoot….it has helped pay his rent for over 40 years!
In addition to the mixed (and constantly shrinking) bag of characters, there are songs they sing and dance to, ranging from an unlikely, suavely Porteresque love duet sung while dancing the Charleston; an obese noblewoman belting out a wildly comical torch song in praise of “The Man With the Ginger Moustache”, while making aggressive passes at a shrinking Col. Blimp-like duffer; a Latin style song “Suspicious” sung by the fearlessly questing woman detective; “The Legal Heir,” a burlesque of operatic villainy patterned after Iago’s Creed from Verdi’s “Othello”; “You Fell Out of the Sky”, a catchy parody of a musical comedy heroine’s rapture over a romantic windfall; a mock suggestive invitation to a boat and safety ashore (complete with a soap shoe routine) wherein towering eccentric entices fey cockney maid with “I’ve got a teeny little dinghy…”; the woman sleuth’s “I Owe It All”, in which she attributes her success to having read the famous writers of mystery fiction, and winding-up on the surviving young lovers’ parody of a hymn to happiness, “New Day.”

IMPECCABLE, HILARIOUS
Among the members of an excellent cast, for whom no assignment of abrupt change of pace and style seems too much, are Barbara Heuman and Kurt Peterson, romping playfully as a pair of pubescent kittens as the gloriously oblivious young lovers; Mary Jo Cattlett, the Sherlock in skirts whose caricature of Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple find that lady with (among other things) a hankering after handsome young men (it proves her downfall); Lu Leonard, whose role of an obese noblewoman with a past, recalls the operatic penchant (parodied by Gilbert and Sullivan) for mixed-up and lost familial relationships, not to mention a hankering for a reluctant former British military officer; David Chaney in riotous take-off on the stock villain of yore (only this time he’s a ruthless, determined, will-hunting nephew); Gary Gage in a caricature of the stock British farce caricature of a Col. Blimp-like, not overly active or intelligent, retired military man; James Brochu, given to all sorts of curious and unexpected, somewhat unease-sparking, doings and remarks, and the cockney maid, played by Patti Perkins, who’s not very bright, but knows that salutations require fast flight.

From Neal Kenyon’s authoritative direction to Lynn Crigler’s buoyant musical accompaniments and the excellent handling of costumes, sets and lighting by David Toser, Raymond T. Kurdt and Richard Cleary, Something’s Afoot is impeccably professional, unfailingly hilarious, and just mock scary enough to satisfy mystery fans. Wait til it opens in London; it may go over the pedestrian heads in New Yawk, but the British will love it. Perhaps you will too!
ARCHETYPES

An archetypal character can be described simply as a “spoof character” or a character that directly imitates the behavioral patterns, speech patterns, and physical appearance of a character that an audience has seen before. For example, audiences can easily identify the “farmer” by visualizing his work boots, overalls, and straw hat.

HISTORY OF ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS

First introduced in the English language in the 1540s, the word archetype comes from the Latin word archetypum meaning “first molded.” Carl Jung, a Swiss psychologist, described archetypes as the brain’s process of retaining behavioral patterns or personalities related to a certain group of people. A literary example might be William Shakespeare who popularized several archetypal characters in his plays such as the “star-crossed” lovers (Romeo and Juliet).

ARCHETYPES IN SOMETHING’S AFOOT

Something’s Afoot is a farcical adaptation of popular murder mystery novels from authors like Agatha Christie. The characters in the musical directly reflect the characters of the novels written from this genre while comically imitating, or spoofing, them. For example, readers are accustomed to the amateur detective character in murder mystery novels. This character enjoys making conclusions and putting the pieces of the story together in order to solve the mystery. This character is an archetype because audiences have seen this person before and they recognize his or her appearance, speech patterns, and conclusive personality. In Something’s Afoot, Miss Tweed is this character. The writers of Something’s Afoot took this archetypal character that audiences have seen before and recreated her so they could tell their story. For the purpose of making Something’s Afoot a spoof, the writers gave Tweed an additional humorous eccentricity; while she valiantly attempts to solve the mystery, her conclusions are predominantly wrong. Regardless of her incorrect assumptions, she is still the archetypal character of the amateur detective.

EXAMPLES OF THE ARCHETYPAL CHARACTERS IN SOMETHING’S AFOOT

- Clive is the butler. He is punctual, stiff, and loyal to his master.
- Colonel Gillweather is the archetypal military man. He brags about his many expeditions, the knowledge he has learned from them, and even arrives at the Racour mansion in his uniform and bearing his shotgun.
- Hope Langdon is the female ingénue. Ingénue means “young and naïve”. She is overly excited to be at the mansion and continuously proves how naïve she is through her actions and her attachment to Geoffrey.
- Lettie is the saucy and vocal maid. She is jittery, anxious, and reluctant to trust anyone within the mansion. The maid typically is focused on saving herself, caring very little about anyone else in the story, and is determined to feed her own greed.
- Nigel Rancour is the distant relative and, in this case, the nephew. He is greedy and spends most of his time searching the house for money, valuables, and/or information on how to acquire them.
- Dr. Grayburn is the doctor. When murder mystery novels first became popular, doctors still made house calls. Similar to these novels, Doctor Grayburn made house calls to the Rancour home for many years and became a close friend of the family.
- Flint is the begrimed caretaker. He enjoys a little too much wine and spirits and is known to chase his co-worker, the maid. The caretaker is rough around the edges and often speaks with a different dialect from the other characters to show a difference in social status.
- Lady Manley-Prowe is the grande-dame. She constantly informs others of her wealth. The grande-dame wears extravagant jewelry and clothes, brags about her multiple large homes, and passively mentions other expensive knick knacks that she just has lying around.
- Geoffrey is the outsider. In murder mystery novels, there is frequently an uninvited guest in the house. This person is someone that the other guests have never met before. This unfamiliarity allows the invited guests to lay their suspicions on this foreign character simply because they know nothing about him.
- Lord Rancour, the host and owner of the mansion. This character is visibly wealthy, exemplified by his large home on a private island, his capacity to accommodate many guests, and the ability to employ three household staff members.
As stated by the writers, Something’s Afoot combines farce, Music Hall, and spoof to create a seamless “mash-up”.

FARCICAL ELEMENTS
In Something’s Afoot, farce is used to create a comical atmosphere by infusing a fast-paced plot with witty and improbable situations.

The noun, farce, comes from the French verb farcir which means to fill, stuff, or insert. Farces are filled with comedy and wit to increase audience entertainment and involvement. Farces have many common elements. As you read the elements listed below, think of stories that you have heard or read that may include these elements.

1. There is a focus on a character’s urge to hide something from other characters.
2. The plot follows an unforeseen chain reaction that results from a character’s secret being revealed.
3. On stage, a farce usually consists of one setting throughout the production with several entrances and exits to other imaginary rooms.
4. The protagonist is usually presented sympathetically which encourages the audience to identify with and root for his or her success.
5. The pace of a farce is usually fast and frantic.
6. The language of a farce will depict differences in social class among the characters.
7. The plot of a farce often includes many events that aim to surprise the audience.

ELEMENTS OF BRITISH COMEDY
In addition to farce, Something’s Afoot reflects influences from many different styles of British comedy. These influences include traditional British humor forms such as Music Hall and spoof.

SPOOF
As mentioned in the previous article, "Archetypes," we know that the characters of Something’s Afoot are spoof characters. They are characters that are developed to imitate someone we have already seen through a comic lens. Spoof is a style of comedy that has been used since the time of the Greek playwright, Aristophanes. Spoof is often used in British entertainment that focuses on using parody to exaggerate well-known stories for comic effect. In a spoof, all good intentions and gold-hearted characters are in danger of destruction in the end. Spoof doesn’t typically focus on mocking the villain but more so on mocking the hero.

MUSIC HALL
Music Hall is a type of British entertainment which became popular in 1850 and maintained its popularity until 1960. The style of entertainment was named after the buildings which held Music Hall performances. The first British Music Hall, built in 1852 and called the Canterbury, was built by Charles Morton, later named the “Father of the Halls.” The venue introduced Music Hall style in England. Similar to American vaudeville, the Music Hall style was identified by extravagant theatrical entertainment while incorporating slapstick jokes.

The Music Hall songs were often used to encourage men to enlist. They were often upbeat and communicated that fighting in the war was every man’s obligation and, once there, it was an enjoyable experience.

MUSIC HALL DURING WORLD WAR I
During World War I, British Music Hall was at its popularity peak. The artists of this genre became involved in the public support of the war efforts and created many patriotic Music Hall compositions.

Here are a few Music Hall song titles:
- “We Don’t Want to Lose You (But We Think You Ought to Go)"
- “All the Boys in Khaki Get Nice Girls”
- “I’ll Make a Man Out of You”
- “Your King and Your Country Want You”
- “Oh, It’s a Lovely War!”

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Something’s Afoot is an original musical spoof, taking place in Great Britain, with influences from mystery novels by authors like Agatha Christie. A whodunit musical, Something’s Afoot is a plot-driven story in which a puzzle must be solved. The solving of the mystery is the main focus of the plot. Similar to mystery novels, clues are offered to the audience throughout the musical and eventually lead to the solving of a crime.

ATTRIBUTES OF A MYSTERY NOVEL

The British Golden Age of Detective Fiction occurred between 1920 and 1950 and involved the growing popularity of murder mystery stories by a predominantly British pool of authors. The authors included Agatha Christie, Nicholas Blake, Edmund Crispin, and Josephine Tey.

The stories associated with the Golden Age had many similar components. Listed below are the most common aspects of a mystery novel that you will also find in Something’s Afoot.

1. The story focuses on the unraveling of a mystery, which will be solved by a series of characters that have –unbeknownst to them – some kind of relationship to each other.
2. The criminal is mentioned early in the story.
3. The scene of the crime, where the story takes place, is typically set in a small village, a train, a car, or a large estate.
4. The characters are cut off from communication with the outside world.
5. The murder and crime is committed by a person who has a direct relationship to the victim(s).
6. The murder or crime is premeditated.
7. A class system is inserted into the story which forces developing relationships between defined social groups.
8. The times and events of the world outside do not interrupt nor have any factor in solving the mystery.
9. The completion of the story serves to reconstruct the story of the committed crime.

Agatha Christie: A Murder Mystery Revolutionary

Agatha Christie is one of the most well known murder mystery writers of our time. Born in 1890 to a wealthy family, she was home schooled her entire life and taught herself to read by the age of five. It was in 1914, when she was 24, that she married Archie Christie and began creating stories. Archie was a World War I fighter pilot and while he was at war, Agatha worked as a nurse in a hospital. Through her work at the hospital, she became familiar with chemicals and poisons. She later used this knowledge when writing murder mysteries which involved deaths as a result of these substances.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Christie’s first novel, was written and completed during the year of 1915 but it wasn’t until 1920 that the novel was published. In her first novel, Christie introduced Hercule Poirot, a retired Belgian police officer and one of the most acclaimed mystery novel protagonists of all time. Christie wrote more than 30 novels with Poirot as her main character.

In 1926, the same year that her mother passed away, Archie fell in love with another woman and asked Agatha for a divorce. Christie went missing for over a week and England was in an uproar over this newly famous writer’s disappearance. Her car was found in a nearby quarry and she was discovered staying under an alias at a local hotel. That year she wrote The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, one of Christie’s most controversial novels due to its twist ending which significantly impacted the mystery novel genre.

In 1930, Christie entered her second marriage to Max Mallowman, a young archaeologist. That same year, Christie wrote The Murder at the Vicarage which introduced another famous character, Miss Jane Marple. Marple was featured in 12 of Christie’s books and was said to define the British Golden Age of Detective Fiction.

Agatha Christie was known as the Queen of the Golden Age. She wrote 93 books and 17 plays including her most popular play, The Mousetrap, which played in London for 30 years.

Is Agatha Christie still a mystery to you? Visit this website to learn more: www.agathachristie.com
WE OWE IT ALL

Something’s Afoot features a song titled “I Owe It All” sung by the amateur detective, Miss Tweed. In the song, Miss Tweed thinks she has just solved the mystery and explains that she owes her knowledge of murder mysteries to many great authors and characters. In addition to Agatha Christie, Miss Tweed gives thanks to Arthur Conan Doyle, Charlie Chan, Mary Roberts Rinehart, William Shakespeare, Wilkie Collins, Erle Stanley Gardner, The Hounds of Baskervilles, Dr. Watson, and Roger Ackroyd.

Here are some descriptions of the authors and characters to which Miss Tweed “owes it all”:

**ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE:**
Author of the *Sherlock Holmes* series.

**MARY ROBERTS RINEHART:**
An American author who combined mystery, crime, and humor into her stories. She is well known for developing the phrase, “the butler did it” and published over 40 works.

**CHARLIE CHAN:**
A fictional Chinese-American detective created by author Earl Derr Biggers.

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE:**
The song states, “And a nod of the head to William Shakespeare, that witches’ brew contained a clue or two.” This refers to *MacBeth*, in which three witches come together over a cauldron to prophesize the events of MacBeth’s future and quickly find the prophecies to be true!

**WILKIE COLLINS:**
A revolutionary British writer who wrote *The Moonstone* which is often credited as generating modern day detective stories.

**ERLE STANLEY GARDNER:**
An American author of many detective fiction stories. His most popular stories were about Perry Mason, a fictional defense attorney who appeared in more than 80 of Gardner’s novels.

**THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES:**
The third book of a four novel series by Arthur Conan Doyle that features the well-known character, Sherlock Holmes.

**DR. WATSON:**
The sidekick, friend and assistant to Sherlock Holmes. Together, Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes solved many mysteries.

**ROGER ACKROYD:**
A fictional character from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* written by Agatha Christie. In the novel, Ackroyd solves a mystery, reveals a killer, and is then murdered.
RESOURCES

SOMETHING’S AFOOT

MURDER MYSTERY, WHODUNITS, AND BRITISH GOLDEN AGE OF DETECTIVE FICTION


MURDER MYSTERY AUTHORS AND CHARACTERS


FARCE

BRITISH HUMOR
Kingswood Resources. “Songs of World War I.” http://www.kingswoodresources.org.uk/history/20century/ww1/songs.htm


BRITISH VOCABULARY AND ARCHETYPES

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