

INTRODUCTION TO  
"THE MOUSETRAP & OTHER PLAYS"

by Ira Levin

An Agatha Christie is, of course, a mystery novel, cleanly written, masterfully surprising, and usually featuring Hercule Poirot or Miss Marple. One begins it, if one is sensible, around nine P.M., and some time after midnight one smites one's brow and says, "Of course! Why didn't I see it? It was staring me in the face!" One marvels awhile and falls into peaceful slumber. As the *New York Times* understated in a funeral piece on Dame Agatha, "She gave more pleasure than most other people who have written books."

There are about sixty Agatha Christies, which in a way is a pity, because their continuing popularity has overshadowed a second definition of the generic noun; for an Agatha Christie is also a mystery *play*, cleanly written, masterfully surprising, and *not* featuring Poirot or Miss Marple. It unfolds in two hours instead of four or five, and being both alive and more concentrated, produces a more intense pleasure. It runs for years, or in one instance forever.

There are about a dozen of these other Agatha Christies, and in them, if one knows the turf, is an accomplishment even more awe-inspiring than those sixty-odd novels. Other novelists, after all, have given us large numbers of first-rate mysteries; John Dickson Carr and George Simenon spring to mind. No playwright except Christie, however, has given us more than one great stage mystery. Check any critic's list of the ten or twelve masterworks in that trickiest and most demanding of genres and you'll find that each play—*Night Must Fall*, *Angel Street*, *The Bad Seed*, *Dial "M" for Murder*, *Sleuth*,

and so on—is the work of a different hand. One real stunner per playwright seems to be all that's possible, and not for want of trying. The sole exception is Dame Agatha, who managed to write not one, not two, but three of the great stage mysteries: *Ten Little Indians*, *Witness for the Prosecution*, and *The Mousetrap*. When you have read them—all three are in this volume, along with five other Christie plays—perhaps you too will wonder that the second definition of an Agatha Christie isn't as widely known as the first.

Agatha Christie turned to playwriting in the midst of her novel-writing career for a reason that was, like the lady herself, both modest and astute. Other playwrights had adapted some of her novels to the stage; they had erred, she felt, in *following the books too closely*. A rare complaint for a novelist believe me. But "a detective story is particularly unlike a play . . ." she explains in her autobiography. "It has such an intricate plot and usually so many characters and false clues, that the thing is bound to be confusing and overladen. What was wanted was *simplification*."

And so, with *Ten Little Indians*, she decided to try the job herself. She proved to be instinctively theatrical, and ruthless as no other playwright would have dared be with her work. Three of the plays in this volume—*Appointment with Death*, *The Hollow*, and *Go Back for Murder*—are adapted from Poirot novels, but you won't find Poirot listed in the *dramatis personae*; Dame Agatha deemed him unnecessary. In *Appointment with Death* she found a new murderer among the principal characters; the novel's murderer becomes the play's comic relief. Two of the dead bodies of *Ten Little Indians* survive and find love in the stage version, and somehow do so without disturbing the pattern of that most dazzling of all Christie plots. (The novel, in its American editions, is called *And Then There Were None*, if you care to compare, and I hope you do.)

Nowhere is Agatha Christie's remarkable ingenuity more evident than in her adaptation of *Witness for the Prosecution*. The short story of the same title is seemingly perfect and complete, with a stunning final revelation that lifts the reader in his chair. Yet for the stage version Dame Agatha devised still another revelation beyond that one, an entirely plausible surprise that not only makes for an electrifying curtain but at the same time legitimatizes what would otherwise have been a necessary deception in the list of characters. Again I hope you will read and compare, especially if you're an aspiring playwright.

*Verdict* is the only play in this volume not adapted from another Christie work. Dame Agatha considered it her best play except for *Witness for the Prosecution*; I would put it somewhat lower on the scale, but I am here to introduce, not argue.

*The Mousetrap*, based on a radio sketch written to commemorate the eightieth birthday of Queen Mary, is the Christie play that is running forever. It opened in London in 1952 and has been wearing out actors, furniture, and theatrical records ever since. Cynics attribute its perpetual run to the smallness of the theater in which it plays, but that small theater was there long before 1952; why did none of its previous tenants become a tourist attraction as popular as Madame Tussaud's and the Tower of London? *The Mousetrap* is a superbly constructed mystery, irresistibly suspenseful from its very first moment, and therein lies the real reason for its enduring success.

Playwriting was, for Agatha Christie, a holiday from the book-a-year routine of her professional life. Reading her plays—more concise than the novels, richer than the short stories—can be the same sort of holiday for her readers. One word of advice to those not accustomed to reading plays: Don't worry too much about the

chairs and tables. It rarely matters whether they're at stage right or stage left, or whether the doors are upstage or down. What does matter is the dialogue. Try to *hear* it, and try to hear the pauses too, that's where the shivers are.

I was fifteen when my parents took me to see the New York production of *Ten Little Indians*. As those figurines vanished one by one from the mantelpiece and the actors vanished one by one from the stage, I fell in love—with theater that grips and dazzles and surprises. I was already a would-be novelist, thanks in part to the other Agatha Christies; now I was a would-be playwright too. That 15-year old boy and I are pleased to be introducing these plays to you.

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