

“Murder on the Bounding Main” is Hilarious ‘Whodunit’ at Sierra Madre Playhouse By Fran Syverson

It's the 1950s, and the luxury liner, “The Bounding Main,” is doing just that—sailing the bounding main! At least one passenger is headed for Queen Elizabeth's coronation. He's Mason Armstrong, one of the breed of right-wing gossip columnists wielding a mighty influence on celebrities' careers. Those whose reputations he damages detest him.

So it's no great surprise when there is *Murder on the Bounding Main*, and that Armstrong (Jim Follett) is the murder victim. And it's no surprise that Mordecai Pierce, honeymooning on the cruise with his wife Teresa, is sought out to find the murderer. That's because Mordecai is an ace detective, and Captain William Mallison (Richard Large) of the “Bounding Main” has need for his expertise. Any of a number of the guests could be suspects.

Mordecai (Jack Chansler) agrees to help find the murderer. But we in the audience are less concerned with the whodunit aspect of this murder/comedy than with all the hilarious and clever quips between the Pierces and among the passengers. The dialogue is refreshing, funny, down-to-earth, and a real kick when the couple engages in a lively lovers' spat.

Detective work is one thing, but Mordecai soon finds he has another problem. The ship's creaking and rolling, very realistically conveyed with sound effects, brings on a bad case of *mal de mer*. He even misses dinner at the Captain's table the first night at sea. Not Teresa! The winsome newlywed (Joanna Houghton) swishes off to the dinner on her own. There she, and we, meet the other shipmates.

It's not a great evening in the dining room of the “Bounding Main.” Armstrong (Jim Follett) is accosted by Cliff Brackett, an actor who feels he's been abused by the columnist's comments. Brian Ames brings the appropriate arrogant swagger to this role. He's accompanied by his personal assistant, Alby Watts (Richard Leppig.) Other invitees to the Captain's table are Terry Savior as Bettie Sheffield and Rosina Pinchot as Mrs. Ellen Gibney. Their connections with the slain Armstrong seem bland and innocent enough, but don't be surprised if some '50s Red Commie intrigues unfold.

But all is not lost. Maureen Ganz as one of the ship's entertainers, “Bernadette,” wears a gorgeous gown and sings engagingly. Playhouse veteran Barry Schwam dons a gaudy plaid suit, bow tie, and shiny black hairpiece to depict Rudy Tudy who tries to wow the diners with his deliberately outrageous puns and corny humor.

So who could have shot the mouthy columnist? Teresa's role of notetaking while her husband interviews each suspect soon evolves, and she begins to ask questions and seek clues. She'd been Mordecai's “girl Friday” before they married, so Teresa feels as if she's picked up a few detective skills too! After all, it's the women's lib decade.

You ask again: who's the culprit? Who cares? Come sail on the Bounding Main, and enjoy the wit and wisecracks, the somewhat overdrawn characterizations. Have some refreshing belly-laughs, antidotes from the world's cares.

Chansler, who plays the lead, also wrote *Murder on the Bounding Main* and original songs. Tom Moses directs this world premiere and Ward Calaway is producer. Lara-Noell Hyatt is stage manager and also appears briefly as stewardess and porter. David Calhoun had his hand in set design, as scenic artist and, with John Shipston, construction. Once again Lois Tedrow's deft touch is seen in the retro costuming. Connie Washburn is lounge pianist.

Barry Schwam is the sound designer, and Maureen Davis sound operator. Serving as lighting designer is Kristen Cox; light operator is Bob Postelnik. The lighting crew includes Dong Kyu Yang, Xiaotian Qin, Chris Pavan, Yoko Saga, and Michael Dessin. Set dressing is handled by Anne Marie Atwan, and

properties by Ruth Thompson. John Johnson is production photographer and, with Calaway, is responsible for program design and layout. Philip Sokoloff is publicist. Orlando Mendoza is house manager.

Murder on the Bounding Main will entertain Sierra Madre Playhouse audiences on weekends through Feb. 21. Curtain time is 8 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays and 2:30 p.m. for Sunday matinees. Admission is \$20 general, \$17 for seniors (65+) and students (13-18), and \$12 for children 12 years and under.

The Sierra Madre Playhouse is located at 87 W. Sierra Madre Blvd., Sierra Madre. Free parking is available in city lots. Restaurants on Baldwin Avenue and Sierra Madre Boulevard offer pre-theater dining for every taste. For reservations or more information, phone (626) 256-3809, or visit the website, www.sierramadreplayhouse.org, for information or for online ticketing. Note that the online ticket charge has been removed.