Shear Madness has right mix of character, audience

**SHEAR MADNESS**

Charles Playhouse.
Warrenton Street.
Tues.-Fri 8 p.m.
Sat. 6:30 p.m., 8 p.m.
Sun. 1 p.m., 7:30 p.m.

By Christine G. Lau

W ho could have ever thought that a serious murder mystery could become the longest running non-musical play in American theater history?

It all began with a Swiss playwright named Paul Porter. In 1965, Porter wrote a script titled *Scherenschnitt* "as an exercise in perception [because] he was interested in the different ways people perceive reality." He set his play in a unisex hair salon and created six stereotypical characters that had both the motive and the means to kill a concert pianist who lived on the floor above the salon. As a twist in his mystery, he decided to let the audience help solve the murder. All in all, this was a fairly decent plot, but it lacked the element that has made its current incarnation so popular — humor.

In later years, when Bruce Jordan saw the play, he recognized its potential. So Marilyn Abrams, a colleague, and he decided to obtain the rights to and adapt this play. They added humor and changed its name to *Shear Madness*.

So how has humor made *Shear Madness* so successful in Boston and around the world? The answer is very simple: the actors, the play, and the audience.

Jordan and Abrams kept the basic plot and stereotypical characters when they adapted the play. The characters include the gay hair stylist named Tony Whitcomb who owns the salon; a gum-popping, nail-filing coworker named Barbara DeMarco, who wears long earrings and too much makeup; a stuffy, snobby rich woman named Mrs. Shubert; a sleazy, swindling antique dealer named Edward Lawrence; a typical manly Boston cop named Nick Rossetti; and Nick's nerdy assistant, Mike Thomas.

In the play, the actors did a fantastic job of portraying their characters as well as adding wit and spontaneity. The characters are credible even though their stereotypical nature makes them one-dimensional. During the interrogation time, the actors react cleverly to the audience's comments and questions. In one show, when it was mentioned that one of the members of the audience lived in Oklahoma, the cast began to sing and act out the musical *Oklahoma*. In another show, the audience was placed in a Dunkin Donuts bag. In another scene, the characters make fun of CVS bandages and Massachusetts General Hospital. In a third scene, the crowd burst out laughing when Tony throws a mountain of shaving cream on Nick's face and then tries to "remove" the shaving cream that dripped on Nick's lap. In a fourth scene, Nick and Tony carry out a hysterical conversation, filled with cheap shots about Barbara's sexual orientation.

Finally, who can resist playing the detective for a night, especially since it's so simple? All the audience members have to do is help reconstruct the events before the murder, ask questions about the characters or the murder, and vote on who is guilty. Whether it's the astute MIT student or someone from Harvard, the play makes everyone feel as though he or she could be the next Sherlock Holmes.

The script itself is packed with local humor, sexual innuendos, and slapstick. In one scene, the evidence is placed in a Dunkin Donuts bag. In another scene, the characters make fun of CVS bandages and Massachusetts General Hospital. In a third scene, the crowd burst out laughing when Tony throws a mountain of shaving cream on Nick's face and then tries to "remove" the shaving cream that dripped on Nick's lap. In a fourth scene, Tony begins to flirt with a member of the audience saying that he didn't recognize the man with his clothes on! As for the rest of the cast, they gave snappy answers with sexual connotation. They also humorously denied their guilt during the reconstruction of the events leading up to the murder.

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