

'Slippery' whodunit is actually a play on politics

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By [Peter Filichia/For The Star-Ledger](#)



Greg Wood as Detective Dorrington in "Slippery As Sin" at Passage Theatre Company in Trenton.

If The [Tea Party](#) is thinking of holding a theater party, it should pass up [Passage Theatre Company's](#) current attraction.

[David Lee White's](#) "Slippery as Sin" will be a boon to liberals — and will stick in many a conservative's craw.

Actually, members of all parties will have to concede that White has accomplished the extraordinary: He has written a mystery play unlike any other.

At first, White seems to be penning a standard thriller. Here in the lovely living room of a mansion, Harry and Lolly are getting engaged. Their guests include Randolph, her father, and Sarah, her aunt, as well as his business partner, Detective Dorrington. Just from the mood that director Adam Immerwahr creates, we know that no good is going to come to at least one of them.

That turns out to be an understatement.

Naturally, there is an ominous butler is on hand. Morrison enters surreptitiously and causes everyone to flinch in fear. They jump higher when he leaves and slams the door. By the time thunder and lightning punctuate every ominous disclosure, we assume that White has shifted gears and is spoofing the murder mystery genre.

Not exactly. White has taken elements from both serious and silly murder mysteries to create a platform on which he can make pungent political statements.

The plot comes to revolve around Diabolicus — the “head of a network of criminals” who commit “crimes beyond our imagination, all with the intent on of creating chaos and toppling our most sacred institutions,” says Dorrington. The detective adds that this master criminal comes from “some hidden corner of Europe or the sands of the Middle East.” And although the play takes place in 1933, there are mentions of mail bombs, destroyed buildings and chaos on Wall Street — all familiar to modern audiences.

Dorrington mentions Diabolicus as often and as menacingly as Senator Joseph McCarthy did when he had everyone fearing Communists. White seems to be commenting on the uneasiness we feel in this post-9/11 world and suggests that we may be overly paranoid.

And eventually Diabolicus does appear — in an outfit that greatly resembles Muslims garb. But White brings up the possibility that Diabolicus may very well be an American in disguise, one who is working against the establishment.

None of the characters here are heroic, and a higher than usual number of them aren't on the up-and-up.

Look at any list of winners of Tonys, Oscars and Emmys, and you'll rarely find a name of anyone who appeared in or directed a mystery. Such works usually sport two-dimensional characters, mere chess pawns the writer moves around.

That's the case here in Immerwahr's by-the-book production. Suffice it to say that June Ballinger is an elegant Sarah and Brian Anthony Wilson plays Randolph with the assurance of a self-made millionaire.

Joniece Abbott-Pratt and Justin Jain are perfectly giddy as the engaged couple.

One joke in the play is that Dorrington is incensed that he's not held in as high esteem as Sherlock Holmes. Actually, Greg Wood plays Dorrington with such panache that one could easily see him portraying the famed British detective.

As the butler, Trent Blanton has a supercilious air that reveals he believes he's a substantially better person than those he is serving.

Before it ends after 90 intermissionless minutes, we'll see evidence tampering, betrayal, and sexual harassment.

Yes, for all “Slippery as Sin” does resemble real life.

'Slippery as Sin'

Where: Passage Theatre Company, Mill Hill Playhouse, 205 East Front Street, Trenton.

When: Through June 3. Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 and 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m.

How much: \$25-\$30. Call (609) 392-0766 or visit passagetheatre.org

SLIPPERY AS SIN is Slick as a Whistle



Occasionally we at STAGE get to review a new play. When you have no preconceptions, no prior productions to compare it to, it makes the review even more exciting than usual. And, when the new production is produced by a skilled team like those at the Passage Theatre Company, it makes the evening a total joy.

SLIPPERY AS SIN debuted on May 17, with its official opening night on May 19. A new comic thriller by David Lee White (the author of BLOOD: A COMEDY, which debuted at Passage in 2009,) SLIPPERY AS SIN is a loving homage to the film noir of the 30's and 40's as well as a tip of the hat to the famous detective genre. The central character is Detective Dorrington, played with great skill by Greg Wood. Wood brings pieces of Sherlock Holmes, Charlie Chan and Inspector Maigret to his portrayal of Dorrington, an aging master detective who is being put out to pasture. He commands the stage, showing the uber-confidence of the veteran problem-solver, and in more private moments allows the audience to see the fraying confidence and skills that he fears the most.

Every master detective has an assistant...in Dorrington's case it is Harry Cleek (Justin Jain.) Harry is clearly devoted to Dorrington yet finds that he must move on. Jain is stellar in this role, as the biographer/assistant, and the frazzled fiancé of Lolly Beltham (Joniece Abbott-Pratt), who is a girl in search of adventure and excitement behind her sheltered exterior. Abbot-Pratt shows the classic side of the ingénue, with the comedic sides that reveal the "bad girl" behind the "good girl."



The hostess of the evening is Madam Sarah Beltham (June Ballinger) who is the woman with a secret. Her secret is shared by Harry's father, Randolph Cleek (Brian Anthony Wilson) and Morrison the butler (Trent Blanton), both of whom have secrets of their own. Wilson and Blanton both shine; Wilson commanding the stage as the munitions factory magnate with very pointed views on politics, and Blanton showing great comedic timing and range. Beltham also shows great comedic skills, her character showing increasing desperation to find a certain document.

The show is directed with great skill by Adam Immerwahr, who keeps things moving along briskly, and adds in all of the prototypical effects...slamming doors, thunder and lightning, and "convenient" blackouts. The cast moves in and out smoothly, never allowing the pace to lag. And, there are some slapstick physical comedic moments that had the audience laughing throughout.

Passage Theatre Company is celebrating their 25th year, and they have a wonderful addition to their history. Take the time to go see this new show...it's a fun evening, with some wonderful performances.

SLIPPERY AS SIN

A comedic thriller by David Lee White

Directed by Adam Immerwahr

May 17-June 3, 2012

Passage Theatre Company

Mill Hill Playhouse

205 E. Front St.

Trenton, NJ 08611
(609) 392-0766
Passagetheatre.org

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A CurtainUp New Jersey Review

Slippery As Sin



By [Simon Saltzman](#)

Who do you think leads those anarchists and radicals? We're dealing with a master criminal the likes of which society has never seen. Someone who can get every subversive to do his bidding — Dorrington
My God. Who is he? — Lolly
His namea. . . is Diabolicus! — Dorrington

One could easily suspect there is an outbreak of farcical spoofs in New Jersey theaters given the recent and current productions of [The 39 Steps](#) at the George Street Playhouse (ended on May 20); [The Hound of the Baskervilles](#) at the New Jersey Repertory Company (through May 27) and [Are You There, McPhee?](#) at the McCarter (through June 3). Since there is no obvious reason or proposed cure for the sudden appearance of this inexplicably invasive/pervasive genre, or any hopes or means by which to stop it, I am happily obliged to welcome the very funny *Slippery as Sin*, a world premiere (dare I say it?) spoof of old Hollywood murder mysteries, the B variety that filled out the lower half of a double bill during the 1930s and 1940s.

The good news is that its author David Lee White and director Adam Immerwahr have not only created a fast-moving, laugh-a-loud howler, but also delivered a nifty 90-minute entertainment that gives us every reason to suspect that *Slippery as Sin* will have a prolonged life after this production closes. How nice for those characters that have to end up dead.

White, whose affection for the farce and his flair for writing them was first apparent to me in [Blood](#), also produced by the Passage Theater. That White injects his own commendably progressive philosophical, political, social views into the plot without being preachy, is a trick that he uses with great ingenuity.

By all means the plot is worthy of investigation, if not White's barely disguised digs at the ills that confront us politically and socially today. And speaking of society, what is it about former socialite cum faux crystal ball gazer Madam Sarah Beltham (June Ballinger) who has fallen upon hard times since the death of her husband that make us think she is insincere as she prepares an engagement party for her niece Lolly (Joniece Abbott-Pratt) in the dingy Victorian living room of the old mansion, wonderfully evoked by set designer Jeff VanVelsor.

And isn't there something strange going on not only between her and Lolly's uncle Randolph (Brian Anthony Wilson), a blustering, wealthy industrialist/capitalist who rants and raves about the threat of radical leftists but also with Morrison, the obligatory lurking butler (Trent Blanton)?

Although the plot has its share of double and triple crosses, it is the horrifically and gruesomely executed murders that are the real gaspers. All are quite brilliantly calculated to provoke laughter all the while there are blinding flashes of lightning (kudos to lighting designer Paul Kilsdonk), bone-chilling claps of thunder and the hard-slamming of doors (heard loud and often enough to shatter the characters' equilibrium).

At the center of the play is more than slightly paranoid but also meticulous clue-gatherer Master Detective Dorrington (Greg Wood). That his young assistant Harry (Justin Jain) is not only Lolly's fiancée but also the clueless son of the ruthless and lecherous Randolph inevitably adds complexity to the ensuing chaos.

The play is cleverly framed by the dashing Dorrington's smugly self-congratulatory narrative. This allows him to slip in and out of the scenes in his pursuit of the arch criminal Diabolicus who he suspects has

been committing the murders, despite all evidence to the contrary. Nothing like this could work without the firmly farcical hand of director Immerwahr and the panache of his company of farceurs that willingly and whole-heartedly submit to the over-the-top style this play's demands. Of course it is impossible not to laugh at lines like "I'll stay with the body," and "One of you in this house must be a murderer." I suspect that the audience and I were mostly responding to the way the actors embrace White's delectably nostalgic dialogue.

Wood is marvelous as the obsessive-compulsive take-charge sleuth who, unlike the renowned Sherlock Holmes, is less interested in finding out who dunnit than in twisting situations and evidence to suit his agenda, a delightful conceit. Ballinger (also Artistic Director at Passage), who is gussied up (amusing costumes by Robin I. Shane) to look like cross between the Madwoman of Chailot and Madam Arcaty, is hilarious as the deviously ditsy Madam Beltham. We could not ask for more from the delightful Abbott-Pratt who screams louder than Fay Wray, or from the others who when seen either dead or alive, attested to the fact the genre is being kept alive at least for the next couple of weeks in Trenton.

Slippery As Sin

David Lee White

Directed by Adam Immerwahr

Cast: Joniece Abbott-Pratt (Lolly Beltham), June Ballinger (Madame Sarah Beltham), Trent Blanton (Morrison), Justin Jain (Harry Cleek), Brian Anthony Wilson (Randolph Cleek), Greg Wood (Detective Dorrington)

Set Design: Jeff Van Velsor

Costume Design: Robin I. Shane

Sound Design: Nick Kourtides

Running Time: 1 hour 30 minutes no intermission

Passage Theatre, 205 East Front Street, Trenton, NJ.

(609) – 293 – 0766

Tickets: \$25.00 & \$30.00

Performances: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, through June 3

From 05/17/12

Opened 05/19/12

Ends 06/03/12

Review by Simon Saltzman based on performance 05/19/12

Arts & Entertainment

'Slippery as Sin' Slithers Into Murderous Bedlam at Passage Theatre

 By LIZ KEILL

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TRENTON, NJ – It's a bit of a haul, but a trip to Passage Theatre in Trenton is worth it, certainly for its current production, "Slippery as Sin" by David Lee White.

This professional theater, housed in a former church, is intimate and appealing. Mill Hill Playhouse is at the corner of Front and Montgomery streets.

The plot centers on a devious plan by Diabolicus, we're informed, to infiltrate a manor on an island. It seems Diabolicus has leftist, anarchist leanings. The time is 1933 and a gathering at the mansion is being held to announce the engagement of Lolly Ballinger to Harry Cleek. Lolly is Madam Sarah Beltham's niece and Harry has been assisting a local detective and writing about his exploits. Lolly is played with just the right hint of hysteria by Joniece Abbott-Pratt. Justin Jain as Harry displays the loyalty that makes him a foil for those who are conniving for their own ends.

We meet Detective Dorrington, slickly played by Greg Wood. He has been dismissed from the Police Department, but nonetheless pursues a ruthless killer whom he has traced to the mansion of Madam Beltham, played by June Ballinger. Ballinger is priceless in her deceptions and efforts to pronounce Diabolicus's name. Very much the grand dame, she has little use for the butler, Morrison, played with haughty grandeur by Trent Blanton. The door slamming alone is worth the price of admission, not to mention the constant thunder outside the mullioned windows of the regal home. Harry's father, Randolph, is also at the house and has his own agenda involving his munitions factory. Brian Anthony Wilson plays Randolph, yet another character who has devious motives**BULLSEYE.

It seems the storm has washed out the only bridge, recalling Agatha Christie's "And Then There Were None." But "Slippery as Sin" is done with glee and melodramatic flair. Despite the door slamming and thunder, every word can be heard as the hi-jinks become more intricate and hilarious. White has written a wildly entertaining farce, with sharp dialogue and double takes.

**STANDARD;

Adam Immerwahr directed this improbable, 90-minute tale with split-second timing. Nick Kourtides deserves kudos for the sound design that keeps the terror at high pitch, with an ongoing 'dark and stormy night.' Paul Kilsdonk's lighting design adds to the gloom and doom, especially with all those blackouts. Robin I. Shane's costumes neatly fit the bill for the period and Jeff Van Velsor's simple but handsome set conveys the former grandeur of a country home.

Mysteries on stage are often a letdown, but this one keeps the audience engaged from start to finish. Yes, there are loose ends, but rapid fire timing keeps it all going strong. Let's hope White's play travels to other area theatres.

"Slippery as Sin" continues at Passage Theatre through June 3. For tickets, call 609-293-0766 or visit passagetheatre.org.

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Passage Theatre's 'Slippery as Sin' evokes '30s murder mystery movies

Updated Mar 30, 2019; Posted May 18, 2012

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By [Ted Otten](#) | [For The Times of Trenton](#)



June Ballinger, Passage Theatre's artistic director, steps before the footlights as Madam Sarah Beltham in David Lee White's "Slippery As Sin."

Remember those deliciously creepy films of the '30s in gloriously atmospheric black-and-white where a group of people is assembled for some vague purpose at a remote location, and somebody gets murdered?

There was usually some wiser-than-thou detective whose mission was to figure things out, a sweet and innocent damsel, a menacing servant or two, a storm raging outside,

and at least one performer who obviously had been instructed to emote grandly in every outrageous way possible.

Those films might have been the inspiration for “Slippery As Sin,” the new thriller by David Lee White, assistant artistic director of Passage Theatre. The play opened last night at Trenton’s Mill Hill Playhouse for a run through June 3.

Expectations run high, since it’s the collaborative effort by the same Passage production team that had a hit with White’s “Blood: A Comedy” in 2010. Adam Immerwahr directs, and June Ballinger, who’s in her 15th year as artistic director of Passage Theatre, returns to acting as a disgruntled former actress who didn’t inherit the estate of the much older millionaire she married and for whom she gave up her promising career.

Although her husband lost a large chunk of his fortune in the Crash of 1929, she and several others have been living on his decaying estate on a former resort island, where the mystery is set.

Like “Blood: A Comedy” and several other Passage mainstage productions of the last decade, this play was developed in the Passage Playwriting Lab and had a successful free public reading last year. It won praise from drama critic Peter Filichia of The Star-Ledger of Newark and mystery writer Kathryn Miller.

“We don’t develop plays there with an eye to presenting them ourselves, although that’s certainly a plus when it happens, Ballinger says. “We want writers to feel free to live up to their potential, and not every play that has come out of the program has been suitable for us, so I recommend them to other theaters.

“I believe that’s part of our mission to nurture talent and be sure that theater appeals to the widest audience possible,” says Ballinger, who now includes teaching at Princeton Adult School as part of her busy schedule.

Ballinger says White had become famous for his witty one-act comedies, so she challenged him to write something full-length. As usual, White has worked closely with director Immerwahr, and rewrites, even during final rehearsals, have been frequent.

That happens often with world premieres, especially when the content of a play is more than what it seems. Ballinger finds that a characteristic of White’s work.

“Of course, laughter is a precious thing, and this play is often hilarious,” Ballinger says. “However, the story and characters also resonate with references to our own time without being blatant or didactic. It’s set in the ‘30s, 1932 to be exact, the down time after the Roaring Twenties, when the economy was rocky and social changes were disrupting many people’s lives, so there are parallels with today.

“Those underlying themes may not be obvious while audiences are enjoying the mystery, but I hope people think about them later,” says Ballinger, who’s pleased that this

production, like Passage's successful Solo Flights Festival earlier this year, boasts international casting.

One of those cast members is Trent Blanton, who's also an assistant professor of theater at the Westminster College of the Arts at Rider University and a resident teaching artist at Princeton's McCarter Theatre. For him, returning to the stage locally is a plus for his educational career.

"How great is it that my students can come and see me do what I've been teaching them?" asks Blanton.

His acting background includes years in a national touring production of "Les Miserables" and the Chinese premiere of that mega-hit in 2002 at the Shanghai Grand Theatre in a production starring Colm Wilkinson, who originated the role of Jean Valjean in the show's first cast in both London and New York.

"I play a butler named Morrison who has, like many of the others on the island, a dubious background which may harbor sinister secrets," Blanton says. "There's a murder, and the detective named Dorrington blames it on a master criminal named Diabolicus, who's infamous for his homicidal rampages. Tracking down Diabolicus has become his obsession in life.

"Part of the fun is that Diabolicus may exist only in the mind of the detective and not be a real person at all," Blanton adds. "That, of course, would mean that one of the other characters is the murderer, and no one can feel safe because someone who has killed once might do it again, and, as the plot develops, there are certainly reasons why one person here might want to do in somebody else."

Blanton didn't want to reveal too much, since that would give away a fast-moving plot he describes as "constantly inventive and very much character-driven."

Did the butler do it? He'll never tell.

"Slippery As Sin"

When

: 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, through June 3

Where

: Mill Hill Playhouse, Front and Montgomery streets, Trenton