

## CRITICAL OVERVIEW

When Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* opened in London's West End on November 25, 1952, few theatre-goers anticipated that the play would become a fixture for the next half-century. The *Times of London* review of the play's opening at the Ambassadors Theatre noted that "the piece admirably fulfills the special requirements of the theatre." That is, there is a good assortment of suspects and potential victims assembled on stage and each is easily identifiable. The reviewer for the *Times* noted that these people "provide the colour, the mystification, the suspects, and the screams" and that "all fit the play as snugly as pieces in a jigsaw puzzle." The audience would find that *The Mousetrap* fits nicely into the Christie tradition: "No sooner have we, following the precepts of our old friend Poirot, peered back into the past—for this is what is known, rather grandly, as a revenge tragedy—and found in the present a suitable couple for the child victims of long ago, than the ingenious pattern shifts, and we are back where we started."

This inability to out-think Christie and solve the crime is part of what keeps audiences flocking to see this play. The run at Ambassadors Theatre lasted twenty-two years;

in 1974, *The Mousetrap* moved to St. Martin's Theatre to continue its successful theatrical course.

*The Mousetrap* finally opened off-Broadway on November 5, 1960, at the Maidman Theatre. At its New York opening, *New York Times*'s reviewer Lewis Funke observed that "a good in-the-flesh whodunit has been overdue." While observing that the play was not a "blood-curdling experience," Funke noted that "it is the Christie skill and polish in throwing you off the scent that keeps the entertainment going." "*The Mousetrap*," Funke stated, "will not exactly shakes you up, but neither will it let you down." While neither the *Times of London* review or the *New York Times* provided the kind of "don't miss it" or "Four Stars" review that many theatre patrons come to expect of a play that is as wildly successful as *The Mousetrap* has proved to be, both papers did pronounce the suspense and clever plotting worth a visit. Apparently the public agrees. The play is simply a well-constructed mystery that holds the audience's attention from the first moment and offers enough theatrical "red herrings" to keep the audience guessing until the play's conclusion.

Throughout the play's run in London, note of its longevity has appeared almost yearly in the *Times of London*. As the play neared its fortieth year of continuous performance, Robin Young, writing in *Times*, considered the play's continued success, observing that "the solution [to the murder] . . . is unorthodox enough to be

unguessable, and unguessable enough to be unforgettable. The play has seeped into our collective consciousness as a national challenge.” That the public has responded to this “national challenge” is evident in the six-month wait to get tickets. As Young stated, one reason that the play has remained interesting and fresh so many years after its opening is attributed to the yearly change in cast and director. A performance of *The Mousetrap*, Young remarked, has become an “essential part of the London itinerary, right up with the Houses of Parliament and the Tower of London.” In the United States, however, the play has never achieved similar status. Nevertheless, the play still remains complex and intriguing forty-five years after its initial performance. In fact, when an attempt was made a few years ago to publish a novel loosely based on the play, called *Three Blind Mice*, public clamor halted the book’s publication. A book, it was argued, would reveal the identity of the murderer. And so the mystery remains to delight and entertain London audiences.