

**The Fort Wayne Civic Theatre  
Presents**

**A study guide of**



**A THRILLER IN TWO ACTS  
BY  
IRA LEVIN**

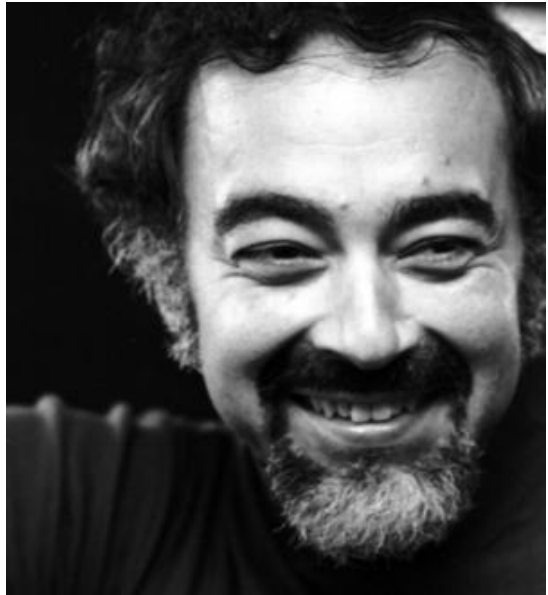
**IN THE WINGS PERFORMANCE  
FOR SCHOOLS & SOCIAL SERVICES  
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2010 @ 7:30 P.M.**

Compiled & Written By Hadley Todoran  
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## **Ira Levin**

Levin was the Stephen King of the 1960s and 1970s. He had a knack for turning absurd plots into realistic horrors, and like King, most of Levin's major works have been made into movies. His novels include *THIS PERFECT DAY*, *ROSEMARY'S BABY*, *THE STEPFORD WIVES*, *A KISS BEFORE DYING*, *THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL*, and *SLIVER*. His plays include *DEATHTRAP*, *NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS*, *CRITIC'S CHOICE*, *FOOTSTEPS*, *DR. COOK'S GARDEN*, *CANTORIAL*, and *VERONICA'S ROOM*.

Levin was born in the Bronx, and as the family's toy business prospered his family relocated to the Upper West Side of Manhattan when he was 13. He went to college and earned two BAs at NYU, but his father wanted him to join the family's toy business. They worked out a compromise: after graduation, Ira could write without worrying about making a living, because his father would support him -- for two years. If the writing couldn't pay his bills, he would have to work for his father. In 1949, CBS ran a contest for original teleplays, and Levin's entry was called "The Old Woman". It told the story of an old lady's murder, as plotted by her nephew and nurse, but in the end the old lady outsmarts her would-be-killers. Levin got second prize, \$200, and later the same script was bought by NBC for \$400, and filmed as an episode of that network's mystery-thriller anthology, *LIGHTS OUT*. Levin never worked in the toy business.



Levin's first play was *NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS*, a comedy about a hillbilly backwoods boy inducted into the military. Andy Griffith played the lead in the film adaptation, and a few years later a sitcom rip-off called *GOMER PYLE, USMC* made Jim Nabors whatever Jim Nabors is. His first novel was *A KISS BEFORE DYING*, published in 1953. It's a remarkably well-constructed book, telling its story in three parts, from three different characters' perspectives. It's been filmed twice -- faithfully in 1956 (Robert Wagner) and wretchedly in 1991 (Sean Young). Levin's second novel, published 14 years later, is his most famous work: *ROSEMARY'S BABY*, in which an average couple find new friends among devil-worshippers. The book was a huge best-seller, and the film, starring Mia Farrow and John Cassavetes, made Roman Polanski's career.

*THE STEPFORD WIVES*, about automatons in suburbia, has been filmed twice and sequelized twice for television. The 1975 film with Katharine Ross and Tina Louise was genuinely scary, while the 2004 remake with Nicole Kidman and Matthew Broderick heightened more of the book's underlying humor. *Deathtrap*, a comedy-thriller by Levin, ran four years on Broadway, and was crisply done for the cinema by Christopher Reeve and Michael Caine.

In Levin's play *DR. COOK'S GARDEN*, the friendly doctor in an idyllic Vermont community has been pruning more than just his garden. Bing Crosby played Dr. Cook in a pretty good TV movie, way back in 1971. Levin's next novel was *THIS PERFECT DAY*, a subversive science-fiction story set in a future where disease, deformity, discrimination and all other societal ills have been cured, and everyone's immunized every week. Remarkably, *THIS PERFECT DAY* has never been filmed, and these days it's probably too radical for Hollywood to try.

In 2007, after the *New York Times* reported that students at Wilton High School in Wilton CT had been prohibited from staging an original play because its war theme was deemed "controversial", Levin wrote a scathing letter to the editor of *The Times*: "Wilton, Conn., where I lived in the 1960s, was the inspiration for Stepford, the fictional town I later wrote about in *THE STEPFORD WIVES*. I'm not surprised ... that Wilton High School has a Stepford principal."

Levin was the recipient of three Edgar Allen Poe Awards, and served on the council of the Dramatists Guild until his death in 2007.

## Works of Ira Levin

### **Novels:**

- A KISS BEFORE DYING – 1953
- ROSEMARY'S BABY – 1967
- THIS PERFECT DAY – 1970
- THE STEPFORD WIVES – 1972
- THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL – 1976
- SLIVER – 1991
- SON OF ROSEMARY – 1997

### **Plays:**

- NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS – 1955
- INTERLOCK – 1958
- CRITIC'S CHOICE – 1960
- GENERAL SEEGER – 1962
- DRAT! THE CAT! - 1965
- DR. COOK'S GARDEN – 1967
- VERONICA'S ROOM – 1973
- DEATHTRAP – 1978
- BREAK A LEG – 1979
- CANTORIAL – 1988
- BODY POLITIC – 1991
- FOOTSTEPS – 1994
- KILLING THE LAWYERS – 2000

### **FILMS:**

- A KISS BEFORE DYING – 1956
- NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS – 1958
- CRITIC'S CHOICE – 1963
- ROSEMARY'S BABY – 1968
- THE STEPFORD WIVES – 1975
- THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL – 1978
- DEATHTRAP – 1982
- A KISS BEFORE DYING (REMAKE) – 1991
- SLIVER – 1993
- THE STEPFORD WIVES (REMAKE) – 2004

### **Television:**

- THE OLD WOMAN – 1950
- LEDA'S PORTRAIT – 1951
- THE PATTERN – 1951
- NOTEBOOK WARRIOR – 1954
- NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS – 1955
- NOTEBOOK WARRIOR – 1956
- SYLVIA – 1958
- THE DEVIL YOU SAY – 1961
- NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS (SERIES) – 1964-1965
- DR. COOK'S GARDEN – 1971
- LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO ROSEMARY'S BABY – 1976
- REVENGE OF THE STEPFORD WIVES – 1980
- THE STEPFORD CHILDREN – 1987
- THE STEPFORD HUSBANDS – 1996
- FOOTSTEPS – 2003

### **Short Stories:**

- THE UNDERGROUND GOURMET – 1954
- SYLVIA – 1954

### Selected Awards of Ira Levin

- 1954 – Edgar Allen Poe Award
  - Best First Novel – A KISS BEFORE DYING
- 1978 – Tony Award nomination
  - Best Play – DEATHTRAP
- 1980 - Edgar Allen Poe Award
  - Best Play – DEATHTRAP
- 1992 – Prometheus Hall of Fame Award
  - THIS PERFECT DAY (novel)
- 1996 – Bram Stoker Award
  - Lifetime Achievement
- 2003 – Edgar Allen Poe "Grand Master" Award
  - Lifetime Achievement



One of the great popular successes of recent Broadway history, this ingeniously constructed play offers a rare and skillful blending of two priceless theatrical ingredients—gasp-inducing thrills and spontaneous laughter. Dealing with the devious machinations of a writer of thrillers whose recent offerings have been flops, and who is prepared to go to any lengths to improve his fortunes, it provides twists and turns and sudden shocks in such abundance that audiences will be held spellbound until the very last moment. "It is a classic thriller, a genre with a style, a manner and an audience of its own. If you like thrillers, do see it. I promise you that it is vintage." —NY Post. "The intricately fashioned plot contortions brought gasps, the comedy lines drew delighted chortles..." —The Hollywood Reporter. "Two-thirds a thriller and one-third a devilishly clever comedy...Suspend your disbelief and be delighted. Scream a little. It's good for you." —Cue Magazine. "If you care to assassinate yourself with laughter, try DEATHTRAP." —Time Magazine.

## Summary

Playwright Sidney Bruhl is not having a good day. The curtain has just set on the premiere of his latest Broadway thriller, and the critics have not been kind. Every writer has their low points, but this is another in a string of failures for the playwright. Once renowned for his hugely popular crime thriller *The Murder Game*, Sidney is quickly falling into the dreaded category of 'has-been'. His wife Myra, frail due a heart condition, tells him that it'll all come back to him one day soon and the latest Sidney Bruhl hit is just around the corner. This is all too much for Sidney, who seems impatient for a hit play to once more carry his name.

A breakthrough is waiting in the wings however, as Sidney announces that one of his students from a theatrical writing seminar has written a most promising play. A play so brilliant and captivating that, as Sidney says, "*Even a gifted director couldn't hurt it.*" This seems to be the break that Sidney has been waiting for, and he arranges for the young student playwright join him and his wife to talk about the play. Sid also hints about a plan to kill the young student and pass the work off as his own, but his wife reacts in horror at the concept, and seems safe in the knowledge that her husband speaks in jest...or does he? When the student playwright comes to the Bruhl house, he seems excited to talk to the famous Sidney about his first play, called *Deathtrap*. At first, Clifford Anderson seems enthused to be speaking about his play and perhaps a collaboration with the famous Sidney Bruhl, but all is not what it seems...and there is murder afoot!

## Awards and Nominations

### 1978 Tony Awards

- Best Play – [nominee]
- Best Featured Actor in a Play – [nominee]
  - *Victor Garber as Clifford Anderson*
- Best Featured Actress in a Play – [nominee]
  - *Marian Seldes as Myra Bruhl*
- Best Direction of a Play – [nominee]
  - *Directed by Robert Moore*

### 1978 Drama Desk Awards

- Outstanding Lighting Design – [nominee]
  - *Lighting Design by Marc B. Weiss*
- Outstanding Set Design – [nominee]
  - *Scenic Design by William Ritman*

## Synopsis

Sidney Bruhl is a playwright who is most famous for his mystery thriller *The Murder Game*. Following the debut of the latest of a series of flops, he returns to his home in East Hampton and to his wife Myra. He tells her that he's received a play called *Deathtrap* from a former student from a playwriting seminar. The play is ready for production and Sidney jokingly suggests that he murder the student and steal the play, a joke that becomes more serious when he learns, after calling the student, that no one else has read the play and no one else has a copy. Sidney invites the student up to Long Island. The student, Clifford Anderson, arrives shortly thereafter. Myra, who has a heart condition, becomes more and more agitated as the evening progresses, trying desperately to convince Sidney to work with Clifford on *Deathtrap* and share the revenue. Instead, Sidney attacks Clifford, strangling him with a garotte. He drags Clifford into the yard to bury him in the vegetable patch.

Following the burial, the Bruhls get a visit from psychic Helga ten Dorp, who's staying with the Bruhls' neighbors. Helga wanders around the study, sensing pain and death in various spots and associated with various prop weapons and handcuffs Sidney has displayed on the wall. She warns Sidney about a man in boots who will attack him.

Once ten Dorp leaves, Sidney tries to convince Myra to calm down and go to bed. She continues to be horrified, only slowly coming to see something of glamour in Sidney's act. As Sidney reaches to lock the French doors, Clifford suddenly bursts through and beats Sidney with a log. After Sidney collapses, Clifford approaches Myra with the log until her heart gives out; she collapses and dies. Sidney calmly gets up, uninjured, and sidles unperturbed to Clifford's side. Their plan is a success: Myra is out of the way.

Immediately after Myra's funeral, Clifford moves in as Sidney's "secretary." Clifford works on a play which he says is about a welfare office but Sidney is suffering from writer's block. Sidney's lawyer Porter comes over to settle some of Myra's affairs and notices Clifford is acting oddly about his manuscript pages. Sidney sends Clifford off on a pretext errand and breaks into his desk to read the manuscript. He is horrified to discover that Clifford is writing the true story of Myra's murder as a play called *Deathtrap*. When confronted, Clifford offers to share the work and the credit. Sidney demurs: he wants to be remembered as the man who wrote *The Murder Game*, not as "the fag who knocked off his wife." When Clifford insists he'll write the play without him, Sidney reluctantly capitulates to working on the play with him.

A few days later, Helga stops by again, ostensibly to borrow some candles in case the power goes out in a storm that's blowing in. She meets Clifford and, when Sidney returns from a dinner party a few minutes later, warns him that Clifford is the man in boots that she predicted would attack him. Sidney assures her that he'll be sending Clifford away, and Helga leaves. Sidney asks Clifford to help him act out some possible bits of business for the play, first by resisting a frontal assault, then by demonstrating how he might wield an axe. Finally, Sidney produces a gun he's secreted for this moment, trains it on Clifford and tearfully explains to him that he cannot allow completion of *Deathtrap* and can only stop him with a bullet. Sidney bids Clifford good-bye and pulls the trigger. The gun doesn't go off, though, because Clifford has taken the bullets to load a different gun that he has at the ready.

Now in control again, Clifford grabs a pair of handcuffs from the prop wall and has Sidney chain his own wrist to a chair. Clifford takes Sidney's money and tells him he's going to pack up and leave. Clifford will complete *Deathtrap* and, if anyone asks, deny that it's inspired by Sidney's story. After Clifford exits to pack, Sidney slips out of the trick cuffs (once the property of Harry Houdini) and grabs a crossbow off the weapon wall. He stalks Clifford and fells him with a single shot. There's a body to dispose of now, but the storm hits with full force, knocking out the power. Sidney calls the police to report that he killed his secretary in self-defense. Before he can finish the call, Cliff appears from behind the chair, stabs Sidney with the crossbow bolt, and finally, they both die.

Some time later, Helga ten Dorp and Porter are standing in the study. The bodies and murder weapons are gone. Helga explains Clifford and Sidney's plot and how they ended up killing each other. Porter and ten Dorp simultaneously realize that these events would make a very successful play. Naturally, madness ensues when both want to claim the idea as their own.

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### PEOPLE:

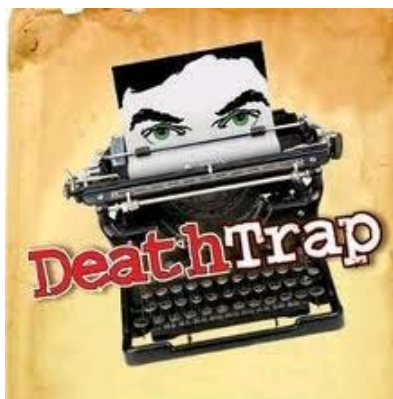
- **George C. Scott** - Academy Award-winning film and stage actor known for his powerful presence. His films include DR. STRANGELOVE (1964) and PATTON (1970). He appeared in the New York Shakespeare Festival's RICHARD III and THE MERCHANT OF VENICE and Broadway's UNCLE VANYA (1973). He was married twice to Colleen Dewhurst, and was the father of actor Campbell Scott.
- Michael Caine - Academy Award-winning British film actor, famous for his roles in films such as ALFIE, GET CARTER, THE CIDER HOUSE RULES, and more recently, as Alfred in BATMAN BEGINS and THE DARK KNIGHT. Caine also starred as Sidney Bruhl in the film adaptation of DEATHTRAP.
- David Merrick - Tony-winning Broadway producer and director who produced original productions of 42<sup>ND</sup> STREET, OLIVER!, and GYPSY.
- Hal Prince - Full name Harold Prince; a Broadway director and producer, he directed original Broadway productions of EVITA, SWEENEY TODD, A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC, CABARET, and THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA. Prince has won over 20 Tony Awards, including a Lifetime Achievement Award.

### PLAYS:

- **SLEUTH** - A psychological thriller written by Anthony Shaffer.
- **DIAL M FOR MURDER** - A melodramatic thriller by Frederick Knott that was later adapted to a very popular film directed by Alfred Hitchcock.
- **ANGEL STREET** - A so-called 'Victorian thriller' written by Patrick Hamilton in 1938 that was made into the 1944 film GASLIGHT.

### MISCELLANEOUS:

- **Sardi's** - A restaurant in the heart of the New York Theater District featuring caricatures of famous Broadway performers on its walls.
- **THE MERV GRIFFIN SHOW** - A popular talk show on air in the 1960s and early 70s, hosted by Merv Griffin.
- **Tin Pan Alley** - The collective name given to composers, songwriters, and music publishers in the popular music industry.
- **The Lyceum** - Broadway's oldest continually operating legitimate theatre.





## West End Whingers

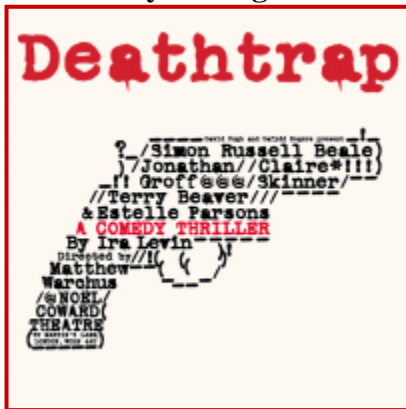
Putting London's West End theatre to rights. Phil and Andrew begrudgingly cut into their wine time to tell you whether it's worth missing the Merlot for the Marlowe.

[« Last Postcard from Edinburgh](#)

[Review – Clybourne Park, Royal Court Theatre »](#)

## Review – *Deathtrap*, Noël Coward Theatre

Wednesday 25 August 2010



Co-operating, or possibly competing, cross-generational writers. One or the other or both may have murderous intentions towards the other. But who is the cat and who is the mouse? Can writers ever be friends? Or is death only ever a disagreement about prepositions away?

Violent thoughts are rarely very far from the surface when the Whingers are working on a "project" so *Deathtrap* turned out, yet again, to be a bit close to home one way and another. And what inspiration there was to be found in Rob Howell's impressive hammer-beam roofed set which is littered with weapons galore – all calling out to be used. At least in our heads. Phil is toying with taking up the crossbow as a hobby.

But we must keep schtum about the nefarious doings in Ira Levin's (he of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Stepford Wives*) *Deathtrap*. The programme pleads: "Please keep the plot a secret and don't spoil the fun for future audiences". And only a cad would do otherwise.

What we can say is that *Deathtrap* is a thriller in two acts, one set, five characters and laughs in all the right places. Sydney Bruhl (National Theatre Treasure Simon Russell Beale) is a once-successful writer of stage thrillers who has had a string of flops. He receives, in the post, the manuscript of a play called *Deathtrap* ("a thriller in two acts, one set, five characters and laughs in all the right places") by a student he once taught in a writing class, Clifford Anderson (Jonathan Groff, Jessie St James in TV's *Glee*). The play is a work of genius and has all the makings of a massive commercial hit.

Bruhl invites Clifford to come down and visit him and his wife Myra (Claire Skinner – suitably nervy in a suitably 1978 brown trouser suit) in their country home. Oh, and to bring the only other copy of *Deathtrap* with him...

*Deathtrap* was Broadway's longest running thriller and sets up its enjoyably convoluted plot ingeniously but much of the fun comes from its almost relentlessly cheeky self-referential stance. There are plenty of gags about producers, agents, lawyers and critics and discussions about the plotting of thrillers including the one we're watching itself. The set, like *The Producers*, is strewn with "window-cards not posters!" of Bruhl's plays ("Shadow at the Window", "In For the Kill", "Web of Danger" etc).

And it's almost a play within a play: Bruhl discusses Clifford's work, "This could be a good thriller..." and we know he's discussing Levin's *Deathtrap* as much as Clifford's "Deathtrap" teasingly subverting the genre. Thankfully as well as its cold third eye *Deathtrap* has at least one tongue firmly in its cheek and its heart on its sleeve.

All this could be dangerous ground if the end product didn't live up to being the "comedy thriller" it's billed as. But fortunately it does. And somehow it stops short of disappearing up its own arsenal of dramatic devices, perhaps because it *is* actually clever in its own right. It's also a highly entertaining (and occasionally seat-jumpingly shocking) piece of hokum, a huge slice of enjoyable camp, but still leaving room for the canvas flaps to be left wide open for the arrival of celebrated psychic Helga ten Dorp (Estelle Parsons, *Roseanne*'s mother Beverly) who senses very bad vibes. We did too in her enjoyably absurd over-the-top European accent, pronouncing *Deathtrap* as "Desstrap". And if the guy ropes need a little tightening in the early scenes this *was* only the second preview.

No tightening is needed for Groff's West End stage debut. In Groff's profile Phil sees the young Christopher Reeve (who played his part in the 1982 movie version) and he is not only charming but convincingly assured as the young writer with steely ambition behind his twinkly, puppy-eyed smiles.

The Second Act is less satisfactory and Levin knew it. "Let me do something about Act 2" says SRB's enjoyably bewildered Bruhl with the air of a man who has been written into a corner. But the laughs keep coming and even if you've seen it before (Phil had seen the film and the play with no less a person than Gordon Jackson – Mr Hudson in *Upstairs, Downstairs* - in the lead) there's still plenty to enjoy and it works much better than the stagy film, apart from the denouement of the final twist which it is understandably able to tie up much more neatly.

[SLIGHT SPOILER] But while desperately trying not to give anything away, despite the programmes entreaties, the Whingers agreed that the production's starry casting does slightly undermine one of the show's surprises. But we shall say no more. [END OF SLIGHT SPOILER]

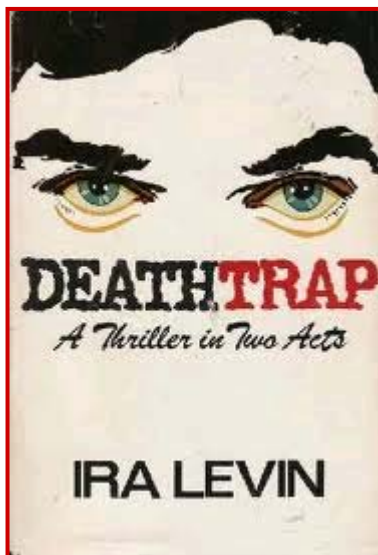
Director Matthew Warchus (rhymes with "torches", we're told) has given the piece a movie aesthetic with some incidental music which is either a nice touch or the thin end of the wedge depending upon your tastes. On balance, we are probably "for" although the clumsy and voice-over recap at the end of Act 2 should be dropped now: apart from anything else it feels patronising. There's also some cranking up of the pace to be done in places before it opens. And one among our entourage quite reasonably pointed out that they should really replace the A4 paper with letter-sized paper (*Deathtrap* is set in the US which never embraced the mathematical beauty of international paper sizes which are all based on a single aspect ratio of the square root of 2).

The overwhelming feelings in the party of 19 seemed to be one of delight at seeing a decent thriller back in the West End and done with such generosity of cash, talent and spirit. But at the same time you *can* see why the genre slipped out of favour. For all its cleverness and post-modernism it still creaks in places. During the interval some of the more experienced (i.e. older) theatregoers in the group were speculating about triple bluffs and twists against which the real Act 2 paled rather in comparison.

But these are merely niggles and the Whingers greet *Deathtrap* with a hearty "welcome back" to the sadly neglected, well-constructed comedy thriller. And yet *again*, we find ourselves forced to say to the Eldridges, the Stephenses, the Walshes, the Bartletts, the Butterworths and the Ravenhills: "C'mon. When are you going to get round to writing that thriller? Pull your socks up and get your fingers out". Phil has bought a crossbow.

### Footnote

The canny producers have come up with an expensive series of enticing film-style trailers for *Deathtrap* which are provoking much discussion on both sides of the Atlantic. We think this will start a trend.



# New York Times THEATER REVIEW;

## 'Deathtrap' Can't Get Away With Murder

By ALVIN KLEIN

Published: March 5, 2000, Sunday

A JOB'S a job. Artists and artisans of theater cannot always do it for love. Is there any plainer rationale for the otherwise gifted to be involved in dragging to death's door a play that desperately needs resuscitation?

"Deathtrap," unfathomably produced at the Paper Mill Playhouse here, has had its day. Even in an age of mega-hits that lay claims to forever ("Cats," "Phantom of the Opera,") Ira Levin's once-upon-a-time thriller still ranks among the top 25 long runs on Broadway. Of only six non-musicals on that longevity list, it remains No. 4. But who on earth is reviving "Life with Father," "Tobacco Road" or "Abie's Irish Rose," the top three?

"Deathtrap" is not a legend, only a statistic.

Given a star of dash and command and a director who can evoke the screams, laughs, enjoyable hysteria, ecstatic shrieks of pure terror, the fun and the foolery -- all words and phrases lifted from critic's blurbs touting the original production -- "Deathtrap" could hold as an archaic representation of a truly endangered genre.

It is not an easy genre to perpetuate in the theater. A recent attempt by no less than Stephen Sondheim in partnership with George Furth, "Getting Away With Murder" was a disaster, while "Wait Until Dark" was starrily revived in vain. To its advantage, "Deathtrap" is a play about a play called "Deathtrap," in its various guises of evolution. It must, therefore, work as the suspense-surprise-murder mystery it is concocted to be for real, as well as a spoof of all the techniques, set-ups and devilish behavior, plotting and tantrums of writers who would kill for a hit. It gives nothing away, even to those who can still be taken in by Mr. Levin's multiple whammies, to quote a neat sum-up by a minor character, Porter Milgrim, a lawyer. "A fake murder to bring about a real one," he says.

If Lewis Arlt, who plays Porter and understudies Sidney Bruhl, the writer who would kill for the kind of hit he hasn't had in 18 years, went on in the lead, the lethargic Paper Mill staging could at least come by a touch of class. Mr. Arlt, who is the artistic director of Fleetwood Stage in Westchester County, is resonant, dapper and oblivious enough to be called blase, an attitude that could work for an effective Sidney.

It may seem odd to begin acting acknowledgement with a small role, but everyone remembers Sir Laurence Olivier's immortal perception: "no small roles, only small actors."

Sadly, the flip side is also true. Jonathan Hadary, for all his credits, is not the big actor for Sidney.

Indicating -- that old no-no in basic acting class -- is what Mr. Hadary does to communicate virtually all thoughts, schemes and emotions, stealth and sly amusement. For Sidney's paranoiac, worldly shrewdness, it won't do. Not that the character must be suave; let him be an angst-ridden Woody Allen type. Just let him be a presence.

That the director Leonard Foglia was only nominally in charge of this flaccid production is a presumption devoutly to be held onto. In a funless, shriekless, ecstasy-proof staging, characters talk at each other across the great divide of the Paper Mill stage, not in Sidney's study; Michael Anania's setting is another sad story.

The trouble begins when the curtain goes up. Sidney Bruhl's country house must be a dream retreat in the woods. It must also be just the perfect setting for a killing, a sanctuary that gives you the spooks. Mr. Anania's set is less a design than a prefab mediocrity that neither invites nor threatens.

If there is one line for which Mr. Levin has been relentlessly overpraised, it is Sidney's seething observation, "Nothing recedes like success." At the Feb. 26 matinee, the dead air in the theater was not discomposed by any semblance of audience response. Tired puns and rampant theatrical references, mostly to thrillers of old ("Angel Street," "Sleuth," "Witness for the Prosecution," "Dial M for Murder") were not energized. But there was a distinctly audible reaction, not to the thunder or the gunshots, but to Sidney kissing Clifford, a young, handsome, threatening playwright. Save for Mr. Hadary's delayed but cryptic display of relish after the moment, no homosexual undercurrent drives the play.

Ineffectual performances, in particular by Marilyn Sokol as a psychic who is supposed to be Dutch or German but comes off as linguistically disabled with a distressing overlay of manic coverup, and Amy Hohn as Sidney's wife, a very small performance in a very small role, for which Marian Seldes set one of the truly meaningless records in theater history, never missing any of the 1,799 performances. Even then, a job was a job.

#### **'DEATHTRAP'**

Paper Mill Playhouse, Brookside Drive, Millburn.

### **Review of Revival Production at Equity Library Theater**

#### **Review by Richard F. Shepard of the New York Times:**

"DEATHTRAP," Ira Levin's 1979 contrived Broadway thriller, is now playing in revival at Equity Library Theater, but don't let the word "contrived," often a critical pejorative, deter you. The play is an amusing theater piece and E. L. T. is carrying it off with estimable flourish.

Not only is "Deathtrap" contrived, it is as convoluted as an artichoke. Its virtue is that it doesn't take itself seriously. All the way through it is laughing at itself and perhaps at the genre on which it is a takeoff, although at its moment of murder it wipes the smile off your face.

A teacher and playwright who has run dry, with only a long-past success to mark his promise, lives with his wife in Connecticut. He tells his wife that he has received a promising script from a former student of his and he muses on how he can get rid of the author and present it as his own.

At this point, the conscientious critic pauses to consider how much more should be revealed without giving away the plot of homicide and deception. It has to do with things that are seldom what they seem, of a neighborly mystic with extraordinary powers of extrasensory perception. The show sets up situations easy for the audience to deduce only to knock them down a minute later.

Indeed, since it is about playwrights, it is about the characters writing a play about the play that is in front of you. Best not to worry about the plot at all, until you have seen it.

Under the direction of Robert Bridges, the cast of five keep the suspense and the comedy in happy momentum. Lewis Morgan, as the older writer, maintains a sense of drawing-room irony that serves as anchor to the production. He is a villain, but not one worth hating. Judith Tillman makes a marvelous mystic, with a Germanic accent and a talent for handling lines that call for swift changes from high melodrama to casual comic throwaway dialogue.

John Donahoe, as the young writer, exudes youthful ebullience and aggressive ambition. Maryanne Dempsey plays the trusting, devoted wife of the villain with convincing faith, and James Bormann gives us the essence of an unimaginative lawyer who has a sudden flash of insight.

John Charles Kenny's set, a large country living room, and Richard Latta's lighting, replete with lightning, provide a handsome background. "Deathtrap" may not be deathless, but it is living theater that will brighten an evening.

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