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# The Wonderfully Witty Drama Queens Bring Agatha Christie to Prague

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On June 25th, I visited the charming Žižkovské divadlo Járy Cimrmana in Žižkov (Žižkov Theatre of Jára Cimrman), a hotspot for student nightlife, quirky bars, strong cocktails and chunky burgers. This teeny, tucked away theatre was hosting an amateur adaption of Agatha Christie's play *The Mousetrap* through the independent student based company [The Drama Queens](#), which has been showcasing productions of fresh, upcoming talent in the English language since 2007 and features the well-known Slovak director and Charles University graduate Martin Murín, who puts his theatrical inspiration down to a second year module he studied, Drama in Teaching English. After his involvement in the university production *Hard Candy*, he developed a mentoring partnership and friendship with co-director Jat Dhillon, and the rest was history. Since then, *The Drama Queens* has churned out seven productions, including two of Havel's plays, and are as ambitious as ever, featuring a tight-knit, talented company and aspiring actors and actresses from Charles University, mainly from the Department of English Language and Literature in the [Faculty of Education](#), who have held a close bond with *The Drama Queens* since its beginnings, and still do today, thanks to head of department Dr Petr Chalupský. Christie's fun and suspenseful murder mystery has been performed far and wide, starting in London, 1952, and known to be one of the longest running plays in history. Set in a London bed and breakfast run by a newlywed couple, the plot sheds light on a strange group of guests who appear one by one in a hurry to shelter from a snow storm. Soon, they're all trapped inside from the harsh weather, cut off from civilisation – and a killer is on the loose after news of a local murder. As tension and paranoia mounts, the thrilling tale leaves you guessing who the culprit is.

This English classic found its niche in Prague in the Žižkov Theatre of Jára Cimrman, a perfect setting for its budding performers – elegant, dim and cosy with a bold and minimalist stage, deep red seats and swishy curtains. Like most places in Žižkov, it was full of character, relaxed, buzzing with chatter and positioned oddly (down a side street on a hill). The auditorium was softly lit, confined, and crammed with students, locals and friends and the bar was serving all of things it should in Žižkov. The production began with some welcoming words from the director thanking the audience and those behind the curtain, who as we saw throughout, put in a tremendous amount of effort and time to bring this gem to us, and an incredibly funny version of it.

This adaption was encompassing and unique, condensing all the best bits of Christie's style in to a two hour cliffhanger and skit. The company was small, charismatic and promising, and their characters were punchy and imaginative, amplified by the intimate auditorium and low stage, the characters only a few feet away from their audience, which is something I think is very special about amateur plays and venues like the Žižkovské divadlo. There was something very raw and honest about it, particularly when it comes to direct address and monologues, which there was a few of, as the acoustics were sharp and projective, and the stage action so close. It was truly a "less is more" performance, with a practical, clever and dimensional stage layout and few props, courtesy of stage designer Klára Svobodová, leaving the elaboration, and our attention, to this feel-good ensemble.

The script and scene transitions were rehearsed and smooth – which is not always the case with university and amateur performances (!) – and the dialogue was fluent and unforced, something that I assume takes a long time to master as performers. I was astonished also by the precision and English accents of the cast, who were comprised all but one of non-native English speakers, yet maintained the high standard I observed at a Charles University adaption of *Shakespeare's The Tempest* (staged by the company *Shakespeare Production*, based in the [Faculty of Arts](#)). All of this, I believe, mirrored the effort and sacrifice of the team to put the performance together and practice it tirelessly. It was evident that the actors and actresses had gone that extra length to make the characters their own. Individually, they mastered their roles and belonged to them, and as a cast, they contrasted and complimented each other, the jokes and dialogue bouncing off one another. The characters were oozing fun and all of the suspense that an enactment of Christie should have, and the freshness that a university cast always has. I also love to see performers with an air of effortlessness and carelessness, which they all carried. Those who stood out particularly to me were Monika Hagenhoferová, who played Christopher Wren and was simply hilarious, bursting with stage presence and flair, and secondly Jan Stibor, playing Mr Paravicini, who got the audience so excited that he entered without opening his mouth and the audience was in fits of laughter, which may have had something to do with his fantastically cheesy Italian accent, flirty facial expressions and an insanely white suit.

Their talents don't stop at acting however – this small crew utilised everybody's strengths and played several roles in making *The Mousetrap* a success. It's very rare for such a young company to specialise and take on multiple roles, and

I was pleasantly surprised in this extra involvement and keenness behind the curtains, of which I'm sure, took a great deal of well-invested time, skill and patience – applause goes to the multi-tasking and talented Ryan Keating, otherwise known as Major Metcalf, who I assumed to be English from an accent that could rival Richard Dawkins, and who is currently the full-time voice coach of *The Drama Queens*. Also, to Tereza Váchová, who pulled off a very dominating and cut-throat Miss Casewell whilst creating and managing the distinct costume design for the play, which was very accurate for the time period and cleverly reflected the personalities on stage, adding to their hilarity. Tereza Chlubná somehow successfully scheduled herself in as PR manager for *Drama Queens* whilst being a very pristine Mrs Boyle, who was illustrated exactly how we'd all imagine her and brought back all our memories of grandmothers and teachers. Likewise, Jakub Turčan, who pulled this all together as assistant director and surprised us all at the end with a twist to the murder mystery... no spoilers!

All in all, the stage loved them and so did we – thanks also goes to Egli Prifti for some magical and clever sound design and Marek Náprstek for the funky poster, tickets and advertisement. What a team!



**Poppy Gerrard-Abbott** is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs.

Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.