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Opening the season is Agatha Christie's "The Mousetrap," which first opened in London in 1952 and has run almost continuously since then. The play will run at the Coaster through April 15.

Lon time North Coast director Susi Brown attributes the play's popularity to its playwright. Agatha Christie, said Brown, created characters who are familiar to her audiences.

"People can see themselves in her plays or in her books," Brown said. "She's quite the trickster, and people like to be surprised."

In "The Mousetrap," a group of strangers is stranded in a guest house run by newly married couple. When a murder occurs, suspicion is cast on everyone there: a spinster with a curious background, an architect who enjoys cooking, a cranky jurist, a retired army major and an uninvited guest whose car overturned in a snow storm. It's up to a police sergeant, who skis to the manor, to find the killer who whistles "Three Blind Mice."

Since she was asked to direct the play, Brown has been sleuthing for clues herself, cleverly played out in Christie's script through the actors' movements and dialogue. It has been fun, she said. "I like mysteries."

A frequent director at the former River Theater and owner of the former Pier Pressure Productions in Astoria, Brown approaches the play academically, probably due to 27 years of teaching literature, theater, speech, dance and art in the Knappa School District. She also has a master's of fine arts degree in theater direction.

She read the play at least five times and wrote notes on it before casting it. She also consulted a stack of books about "The Mousetrap" and Agatha Christie.

Although she directed the play at Knappa



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As with any murder mystery, everyone in "The Mousetrap" has a secret, and Detective Sergeant Trotter is trying to determine what those secrets are. From left, are Mrs. Boyle (Toni Ihander), Mollie Ralston (Emily Dante), Trotter (David Sweeney), Mr. Paravicini (Don Conner), Giles Ralston (William Ham), Miss Casewell (Heather Neuwirth), Major Metcalf (Frank Jagodnik) and Christopher Wren (Tim Garvin). Not pictured is Richard Bowman, who also plays Christopher Wren.

High School and saw performances of it in London and again in Astoria, Brown still had "tons of questions" about Christie's intention. "There were a lot of details," Brown said. "I had to ask, 'Why is that happening?'"

While she prepares herself thoroughly as a director, Brown still wants her cast to bring their own insight into the characters they play. Her cast includes actors ranging from Nehalem to Washington's Long Beach Peninsula. All have appeared on the Coaster stage before.

Uppermost in her mind is maintaining the surprise for the audience. To do that, the actors must get "underneath" their characters' multi-dimensional personalities so their responses to each other are natural onstage and contribute to the story being told, Brown said. The audience, then, can enjoy picking up clues of its own.

If an actor is confused about some dialogue or movement, Brown will discuss with him or her the character's "back story." Sometimes she needs to tell a brief bit of history about mid-century England or talk about

some aspect of British culture. At other times, she provides some vocal techniques for those doing British or Italian accents.

The cast members — both the seasoned and those who are less experienced — have absorbed the personalities Christie developed. They will keep the audience interested — and guessing — until the big reveal, Brown said.

"I just feel like a person who inherited a beautiful crystal bowl of candy with this cast," she said. "This has been a real treat."

Christie's play is more than a mystery, Brown said. It's also a description about what it was like to resume life after World War II.

"Food was still being rationed. People were going through a very hard time," she said. "What happened to people who had hopes and dreams?"

Mollie and Giles Ralston (played by Emily Dante and William Ham), married only a year, represent the young generation facing an optimistic future, who experience the "relief of coming out of the war and possibly feeling giddy, asking themselves, 'What are we going to do now?'"

They also represent a change in a culture where hasty war marriages were made without parental vetting or consent. "What once was is no longer," Brown said.

Brown literally wears the play on her collar at every rehearsal: She attaches three mouse pins on her jacket or blouse. Her mother also collected mouse pins.

"I think I have, at present count, probably 12 different sets of three mice," Brown said, checking out a cute wooden mouse pin with green ears and a long leather tail. If she forgets to adorn her jacket, there's a mouse pin on her rehearsal bag.

"I would be completely unnerved if I showed up one day without a mouse," Brown said.



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William Ham as Giles Ralston, Emily Dante as Mollie Ralston, David Sweeney as Detective Sergeant Trotter in "The Mousetrap."



PHOTO BY NANCY MCCARTHY

Heather Neuwirth, as Miss Casewell, dances to the "Flight of the Bumblebee," to annoy the cranky Mrs. Boyle, played by Toni Ihander in the murder mystery "The Mousetrap," opening March 3 at the Coaster Theatre in Cannon Beach.

CHECK IT OUT

What: The Mousetrap, opening the 45th anniversary of the Coaster Theatre Playhouse

Where: Coaster Theatre Playhouse, 108 N. Hemlock St., Cannon Beach

When: 7:30 p.m. March 3 to April 15; Sunday matinees are 3 p.m. March 12, 26 and April 2

Who: Directed by Susi Brown and performed by: David Sweeney, Emily Dante, William Ham, Toni Ihander, Frank Jagodnik, Heather Neuwirth and Donald Conner. Richard Bowman and Tim Garvin share a role.