



Friday, May 23, 2003

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Audience, cast mix in Ancient City mysteries

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By Sharon Weightman
Special to the Times-Union

When a casually dressed young woman arrives at the restaurant alone, just as your drink order is being taken, you feel sorry for her. Her life must be a little lonely, you think, to attend a murder mystery performance all by herself.

On the other hand, when a man with a heavy dose of New York attitude gets loud and belligerent, you're pretty sure it's part of the entertainment. You certainly hope it is.

By the time you're tucking into a substantial Sunday lunch, you've figured out that the solitary young woman is a cast member planted among the guests, the fellow threatening violence is only acting and the dramatic action is well underway. The maestra of the event -- Shirley Holmes, the supposed better half of the famous Sherlock -- has introduced herself and established the ground

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The MurderWatch Mystery Theatre cast presents murder and mystery each Sunday.
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rules for solving the crimes yet to be committed. Most of the performers have introduced themselves in one way or another.

MurderWatch Mystery Theatre

When: 2 p.m. Sundays. Reservations required.

Where: The Garden Eatery, 4320 A1A S. in Ocean Gate Plaza.

Cost: \$24.95 for lunch and show.

Information: (904) 471-2691 or www.murderwatch.com.

The game is afoot, as Holmes said to Watson.

The game is afoot every Sunday in St. Augustine Beach at The Garden Eatery, a new setting for the MurderWatch Mystery Theatre. The restaurant, which can accommodate up to 80 diners, offers an appetizing lunch selection with table service along with a matinee performance of the murder mystery.

Not only do diners jot down clues and join in the detection, many are drawn into the action by a cast of performers with years of experience in this theater genre. By the end of the show, viewers are presented with a

number of possible solutions and must rally to the banner of their favorite murderer or murderess.

At any given performance, the plot twists and the outcomes can change, depending on audience action and reaction. But, regardless, you're far more likely to spend your time laughing than taxing your deductive powers. The "mystery" is mostly about pure entertainment -- not to mention a good meal.

The MurderWatch Mystery Theatre came into being in 1990 when director Connie Gay and her husband, producer Jeffrey Gay, wanted to start a theater enterprise they could do together. After a cross-country jaunt to see what other cities offered, they decided to create a murder mystery that included music.

"Flying home, we began writing on beverage napkins, creating the characters," Jeffrey Gay recalls. "Connie had a background in directing and choreography, I had a background in music and acting, and we both

You don't have to go to St. Augustine to get an interactive dinner theater experience. Here are a couple in Jacksonville:

Tony and Tina's Wedding

Where: Johnny Leverock's, 9750 Deer Lake Court.

When: Saturdays, reservations required.

Seating: 7 p.m.

Curtain: 7:30 p.m.

Cost: \$52.43 per person (tax and gratuity included).

Meal: Entrees are either chicken cordon bleu or stuffed mahi-mahi; dinner served at table. Cash bar available.

Plot: This production has been running for a year. It's a fast-paced comedy that portrays a

had done some writing. But this was the first thing of consequence that we had created together."

They decided to base the show in Orlando and began with performances on a riverboat. After some initial success, Disney expressed interest and the show was revised to make it more family-oriented. Their company continues to produce its mystery show at Disney's Grosvenor Resort, but recently the Gays expanded to the St. Augustine venue.

"We'd been taking vacations in St. Augustine and loved it," Connie Gay said. "We thought, 'Wouldn't it be great to put a family event here?' "

They researched a number of possible restaurants, but settled on The Garden Eatery.

"Elayne Haines, who owns the Eatery, takes tremendous pride in her food and we knew she was the right person to join forces with," Jeffry Gay said.

The restaurant's co-owners, Haines and Jewell Melton, describe The Garden Eatery as "a Florida bistro" featuring "American cuisine with a Caribbean flair."

Although the St. Augustine venue began by using actors from the 35-performer group that works in Orlando, the show now has its own North Florida cast, with the ability to supplement as needed from the Grosvenor-based group.

"Most performers end up spending seven or eight years working with us," Jeffry Gay added. "They know what things are likely to happen in a show and how to react to make what the audience does into something funny."

"Funny" occasionally includes slightly risqué material. The tourism Web site theotherOrlando.com describes it this way: ". . . the humor, while sometimes on the racy side, is strictly PG and the kids seem to love it."

New York Italian wedding and reception; cast and guests interact.

Information: (904) 997-1111

Can You Say Murder?

Where: Dave & Buster's, 7025 Salisbury Road.

When: Saturdays, reservations required.
Seating: 7 p.m.
Curtain: 8 p.m.

Cost: \$32.95 per person (plus tax and gratuity).

Meal: Three-course dinner includes either prime rib or lemon herb grilled chicken, garlic-roasted potatoes, garden vegetable medley, fresh dinner rolls, chocolate mousse, coffee or iced tea; dinner served at table. Cash bar available.

Plot: Guests and cast interact to solve crime, which changes every month or so.

Information: (904) 296-1525

"With a family-oriented show, we try to walk a fine line between involving kids but never boring adults," Jeffrey Gay explained.

The mystery show concludes with dessert for everyone and some prizes for the top detective. While not every amateur detective can win, everyone can -- as Sherlock said -- play the game for the game's own sake.



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