

## **THE MOUSETRAP IN SHANGHAI**

Taking Agatha Christie's 1950s whodunit to China's city of the future  
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The junction of Changle Road and Maoming Road South is a microcosm of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Shanghai. Above it looms the huge, cylindrical JinJiang Tower Hotel, whose 38 floors are topped by the Blue Heaven Revolving Restaurant. Walk east, along an avenue of grey trees festooned with overhead cables, and you pass high-fashion boutiques selling diamante dresses and Union Jack ties, alleyways choked with rubble and rusting pipes, noisy games of mah-jong being played outside basement restaurants, and the trendy Osteria Yakitori Bar. Head north and you encounter redbrick and stucco-fronted houses draped with washing, the pale blue hoardings of a vast building site, the Teddybearcollectors emporium and the former home of Mao Zedong. But few things in this strange cultural stir-fry could be less expected on a grey winter's day than the poster outside the State-run Lyceum Theatre advertising *The Mousetrap*.

Agatha Christie's whodunit is, famously, the longest-running play in the world. The St Martin's Theatre production has now attained its 58<sup>th</sup> year, clocking up almost 25,000 performances. Only once before has it been seen outside the West End, for a single night at an Agatha Christie festival at Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex – though this does not imply a lack of invitations, or imitations. 'Lots of people have wanted us to take it abroad,' says the play's producer Sir Stephen Waley-Cohen, 'but until now it never made economic sense to transport the cast and reconstruct the entire set for a limited period of time. We've allowed the play to be translated, but we never license English-language productions, in case they get mistaken for ours.'

The man responsible for bringing this 1950s time capsule to China's most futuristic city is a Mr Zhang, whose declared ambition is to create a 'Modern

Drama Valley' equivalent to Broadway or the West End. Judging from *The Mousetrap* team's experience, there is still some way to go. 'I've done shows abroad before,' says Denise Silvey, the production supervisor, 'but I've never experienced anything like this. I'd send an email and get a reply four days later; I told them we needed a pair of skis and they sent me a picture of two snowboards with the Adidas logo. Then we had to establish whether it was possible to get a pistol in China. I won't get started on the whole business of visas.'

In London the play's entire cast changes every ten months ('to stop the actors from becoming bored,' explains Stephen Waley-Cohen, 'though we might invite them back after an interval, particularly those doing the older parts.'). With a swap-over due at the end of January, the original plan was that all the outgoing actors should travel to Shanghai; in the event, only three have proved available. A benefit of the play's longevity is that there is no shortage of professionals with *Mousetrap* experience (around 250 at the last count) so the remaining five parts looked easy to fill, until two actors dropped out at the last moment. As a result, Denise Silvey finds herself taking the role of the mannish Miss Casewell, while Matthew Hebden – originally recruited as Assistant Stage Manager – has stepped in as Giles Ralston, proprietor of the remote country guesthouse in which the play is set.

It is, consequently, a team with just three rehearsals behind it that assembles at Gatwick Airport on a chilly Sunday morning for the eleven-hour flight to Shanghai. The backstage crew consists of stage manager Hannah Shafran – on holiday from the Queen musical *We Will Rock You* – and wardrobe mistress Debbie Hammond, who is responsible for five large cases of tweeds. What the troupe notably lacks is a director; but, says Bob Saul, who plays Detective Sergeant Trotter, 'To be honest, you only get two weeks with a director in London, so we're used to doing without.' Like John Fleming (as the sinister Mr Paravicini) and Crispin Shingler (the exuberant young Christopher

Wren) he is so fresh from his West End stint that he has only been offstage for twelve hours.

The actors vary widely in age and experience. For Bob, aged 24, this is his first overseas tour and his first time outside Europe. John Fleming has had six seasons in *The Mousetrap* and given over 2,000 performances ('I saw it as a student in the Sixties and thought, "I'd never do that!"'). Priscilla Gray, who plays the elderly Mrs Boyle, toured Scandinavia in her youth with her own experimental theatre company; Kathryn Martin, the leading lady, has done *Lock Up Your Daughters* in Malta. None have been to China before, though Matthew Hebden claims an ancestor who set up the first Eastman Kodak office there.

The mood in the departures hall is of excitement tempered by fear of the unknown. In the case of Paul Brennan (Major Metcalf) this is an adventure he could not have dreamed of during his previous career as a car salesman. Debbie Hammond, as a lover of Chinese design and culture, is keen to see a traditional tea ceremony; Crispin Shingler, in the most bizarre of coals-to-Newcastle exercises, has packed his own supply of Yorkshire teabags.

As for Sir Stephen, if he is having second thoughts about the enterprise he is not showing them. The one anxiety he admits to is the danger of illicit filming in the land of pirate DVDs, for *The Mousetrap* has never been seen on screen – its author having stipulated, when the film rights were sold to an unfortunate producer in 1956, that no film could be made of it until six months after the close of the West End run.

The following morning (as it is with an eight-hour time difference), when flight VS250 touches down at Shanghai Pu Dong airport, the Mousetrapp Family – as Debbie Hammond christens them – look less game on. Most have spent the flight watching films rather than sleeping, and make their way groggily through an echoing marble concourse which puts Gatwick to shame. The eight-hour time difference is something they have not begun to grapple with.

Sir Stephen has arranged for a single interpreter to meet us, so there is some confusion when the young man in question appears with five friends in tow. It is to be the first of many examples of Chinese overstaffing – though given that the country has 1.3 billion people to keep busy, this is perhaps a permissible indulgence.

As the airport is connected to Shanghai city by a state-of-the-art magnetic-levitation train which travels at 270 mph, the party is disappointed to be crammed into a Fifties-style minibus for the twenty-mile journey. On the elevated freeway we pass a bewildering variety and density of housing, from pagoda-roofed estates to Art Deco high-rises, interspersed with the occasional forgotten dwelling marooned in a dry wasteland.

The second surprise of the day is that the company's hotel has been changed without consultation. Instead of being near the theatre in the Jing'an district, the actors find themselves on the other side of the Hangpu River in the recently developed Pudong area. Since the tunnel connecting the two sometimes becomes so clogged that taxis refuse to take it, this is clearly not ideal. No explanation is offered, though it is suggested that Mr Zhang has a business relationship with the new hotel.

The Barony Wanyuan stands at the end of a row of smart new buildings where Pudong Avenue peters out into riverside desolation and warehouses; opposite is a row of nightclubs with imaginative names – Sticky Fingers, the Happy Sisters Pub, the Naughty Beaver. Still, at least it is clean and offers most of the amenities of a modern hotel, apart from heating in the corridors and helpful receptionists. Room keys are distributed at random: some find themselves in airy suites overlooking a building site, others in humbler accommodation with views of the barge-studded river.

Lunch is hosted by Mr Zhang in the hotel restaurant. A slim, middle-aged man in a black polo-neck and grey jacket, he is clearly a person of consequence, for he spends most of the meal with his mobile clamped to his ear. As we chew on an unidentified gelatinous pudding, one of the interpreters

– an IT and accountancy student called Rinn – explains that Agatha Christie (‘Ajasha’ to her fans) has an enthusiastic following in Shanghai: ‘Lots of young people are reading her books; a publisher recently did all of them very beautifully, very well translated. There have also been many adaptations by students for the stage.’

Mr Zhang, it transpires, has already produced three Agatha Christie plays – *Towards Zero*, *Black Coffee* and *Appointment With Death* – while a rival impresario has tapped into the John Buchan market with *The 39 Steps*. ‘People who have read the books will have a different feeling seeing the plays,’ he observes. Asked what type of audience he expects, he is unusually precise: ‘About half will be foreigners. The rest will be Chinese men between 25 and 30, with a good command of English.’

After lunch the *Mousetrap* team sets off to inspect the venue. Along the way there are glimpses of extraordinary, neck-cracking buildings: the 88-storey, 340-metre Jinmao Tower, whose express lift travels at nine metres per second; the Oriental Pearl Tower, which resembles a pair of skewered Christmas-tree baubles; the Shanghai World Financial Centre, the third highest structure on earth. But none of these captures the visitors’ imagination like the Lyceum Theatre.

Built in the 1930s and recently restored, the Lyceum is a small jewel. The elegant, domed auditorium boasts classical columns and Art Deco grilles, a balcony embellished with gilt urns and swags, red plush seats and Tiffany-style lamps. Under the chandeliers in the foyer, a pair of marble staircases sweep upwards as if expecting an entry by Fred Astaire. The finishing touch is a portrait of the young Margot Fonteyn, who danced here as a twelve-year-old when her parents lived in the city.

Even more importantly, the stage is occupied by an English country-house drawing room almost identical to the set at the St Martin’s. The one significant difference is that it is separated from the audience by a ten-foot apron,

apparently the result of filling in an orchestra pit. ‘We’ll just have to *pro-ject*,’ declares Priscilla Gray. ‘Isn’t it a lovely little theatre?’

‘Gorgeous,’ says Hanna Shafran, who has been exuding enough nervous energy for the whole company, and is suddenly all smiles. ‘Absolutely gorgeous.’

There is, nevertheless, still much to sort out – and the opening night is only three days away.

The following afternoon a press conference is held for local journalists. Stephen Waley-Cohen sits on a squashy leather sofa and expounds on the difficulties of commissioning a set at long distance. The *China Daily* wants to know why Shanghai has got *The Mousetrap* before New York; the answer is that Agatha Christie didn’t trust Broadway to produce it properly.

Also present is the dean of the Shanghai Theatre Academy. What on earth is he doing here? Good entertainment *The Mousetrap* may be, but it does not by any stretch of the imagination constitute cutting-edge drama. Has he perhaps confused it with another play 58 years younger? Only later, when I talk to Rosita Janbakhsh – a young American who runs her own Shanghai Repertory Theatre company – does the reason for his interest, and the importance of the tour, become clear.

The government, she explains, has strong views on what can or cannot be seen in China. In cinemas, the number of foreign films shown is restricted to twenty a year (during *The Mousetrap*’s run, the hugely popular *Avatar* was pulled to make way for film on Confucius). As for theatre, ‘It’s one of the most heavily regulated media – more even than the visual arts or music. And because most of the venues are government-run, they aren’t free to choose what they do: there are only a couple of independent ones in the whole of China.’

An old-fashioned mystery like *The Mousetrap* might seem harmless enough, but so did the production of Handel’s *Messiah* which was closed down just before Christmas; and any international event which puts China in

the world's eye is likely to spark repression. 'When Björk made her protest on behalf of Tibet here a couple of years ago, they banned a lot of artists; and during the Olympics it was insane. After the demonstrations in Paris they went around deporting anyone who was French: one girl I know was given ten minutes to pack and taken to the airport, even though she hadn't done a thing. No foreign productions were permitted and no foreigners were allowed to get together while the games were going on. Now we have Expo 2010 coming to the city in May, and we're wondering what will happen: we know there will be tighter restrictions.'

Some companies manage to avoid the authorities' gaze by mounting underground productions; 'But to do something big like *The Mousetrap* is another matter: you have to know the right people, and you have to have money.'

On the stage of the Lyceum, Denise Silvey and Hannah Shafran have other things on their mind as they try to sort out various glitches with the set. The painted fireplace needs a hole cut in it to allow for stage business with logs – which are themselves a problem, since the word 'log' does not appear to exist in the Chinese language. It is eventually agreed to make do with split poles.

Then there are the sound cues and special effects. 'One thing we've been trying to communicate for months is the idea of a door slamming,' sighs Denise; in the end a quarter-size door and frame are rigged up in the wings. A snow machine is also on her wish list, but the only one available is too noisy, so the actors have to be sprinkled with plastic flakes before they make their entrances.

The theatre swarms with people whose function is not immediately apparent. How many Chinese technicians it takes to change a light bulb remains a mystery, but nailing a scone to a wooden wall is an operation that draws an audience of twelve. They in turn are watched over by an 'antique' portrait with a web address clearly legible in one corner.

The cast spend the afternoon familiarising themselves with the stage and acting three short scenes for local television. Wednesday brings a technical run-through followed by the first dress rehearsal; a new challenge is co-ordinating the Chinese translation being shown on screens to either side of the stage. Everything goes reasonably well, but jetlag is beginning to take its toll: Denise is worried about falling asleep in mid-scene, Debbie about missing her prop cues. One thing that helps keep them awake is the chill in the theatre, which – despite the warmth of the air outside – is considerable.

Thursday dawns grey and much colder, the temperature in the city suddenly down from 18°C to 6°. At breakfast in the hotel there are signs of pre-first-night nerves: Matthew has been watching the Chinese equivalent of *The X-Factor* and reports that instead of cheering crowds it features a stony-faced audience holding up placards: will this evening's house be equally restrained? Crispin Shingler's Shanghai experience has made him all too aware of the cultural gap: 'If I can't explain in a restaurant that I want to have a drink now and eat later, how am I going to communicate my character to an audience?'

The afternoon's final dress rehearsal throws up further communication problems. The radio connecting Hannah in the control room to Debbie backstage packs up; nor is the theatre's Tannoy working. Can the hand bell from the prop table be borrowed to summon the audience to their seats? Absolutely not.

Another concern is the number of unauthorised people wandering around in the wings: in particular, a succession of beautiful and smartly dressed young women who come in through the stage door and disappear into the upper reaches of the building. Their destination turns out to be a ritzy piano bar called the J Club; it is agreed that they can keep tip-toeing through as long as there are no singalongs during the performance.

By the time the theatre's doors open at 7pm, two thirds of the 600 tickets have been sold. It is soon obvious that Mr Zhang's audience forecast is way off the mark: expatriates are few and far between, and those there are have



mainly come with Chinese wives or girlfriends. As for the rest, the majority are young women with what seems to be a very limited command of English – something clearly anticipated by a local language school, whose reps have unexpectedly set up shop in the foyer and press their brochures on every new arrival.

It is to improve his English that Philippe Zonggu (who, like so many Chinese, had adopted a Western Christian name) has travelled 120 miles to see the show. ‘The problem here is that there are a lot of Chinese who speak English with American accents,’ he explains. ‘I am not familiar with Agatha Christie’s books, but since this is the first time one of her plays has been done in English it is a novelty for everyone.’ Edward Alu, who works in the petrochemical industry, has come because of his wife: ‘She likes the novel series very much. I’m really looking forward to seeing this – it’s an exciting thing for Shanghai, and the more cultural exchange there is between China and foreign countries the better.’

As the play begins, the audience’s mood is expectant but not, it has to be said, as reverential as one might like. They rustle their sweet papers; they rustle their shopping bags; they give each other running commentaries; they check their text messages. But this does not mean they are not enjoying themselves. One of Stephen Waley-Cohen’s main concerns has been whether they will get the jokes, and this they obviously do – particularly one about the shortcomings of British husbands. When the interval comes, the auditorium seethes with speculation about the murderer’s identity; the one complaint is that the Chinese translation is not quite in synch with the lines being spoken.

The second act is darker, and – with the cast giving a crisp performance – the level of concentration rises. By the time the murderer is unmasked, the spectators are literally on the edge of their seats; an audible gasp greets the moment of revelation. When the curtain falls the applause is loud and enthusiastic: the Shanghai *Mousetrap* is unquestionably a hit.

A bespectacled young man in an anorak is keen to share his delight, though he declines to give his name. ‘I love Agatha Christie,’ he says. ‘I have 80 of her books. I love the Poirot television series with David Suchet. I have seen her plays performed in Chinese, but to see one with British actors – it’s a completely different experience.’ Rinn, the interpreter, confesses to being transported: ‘I actually could imagine a similar situation in real life. The snow on their hats and coats, the sound of the wind becoming louder when the window is opened – I think the audience really appreciated those details.’

Backstage, there is an air of huge relief. ‘When you’re taking a play to a totally different culture you know it could fall flat on its face,’ says Kathryn Martin. ‘But after the first ten minutes I just thought, “Yes – this is really good”.’ The show, though she does not yet know it, will be sold out for the second half of its run.

The first-night party takes place at one of the city’s smartest restaurants, M on the Bund, overlooking the river. Standing on the terrace watching the red flag of the People’s Republic flutter against a backdrop of glittering skyscrapers, Shanghai seems as improbable a fiction as Agatha Christie’s lonely manor house; their meeting, more implausible still. But, as the Chinese proverb says, ‘If there exists an affinity between us, we shall somehow come together – even if separated by the greatest gulf on earth.’