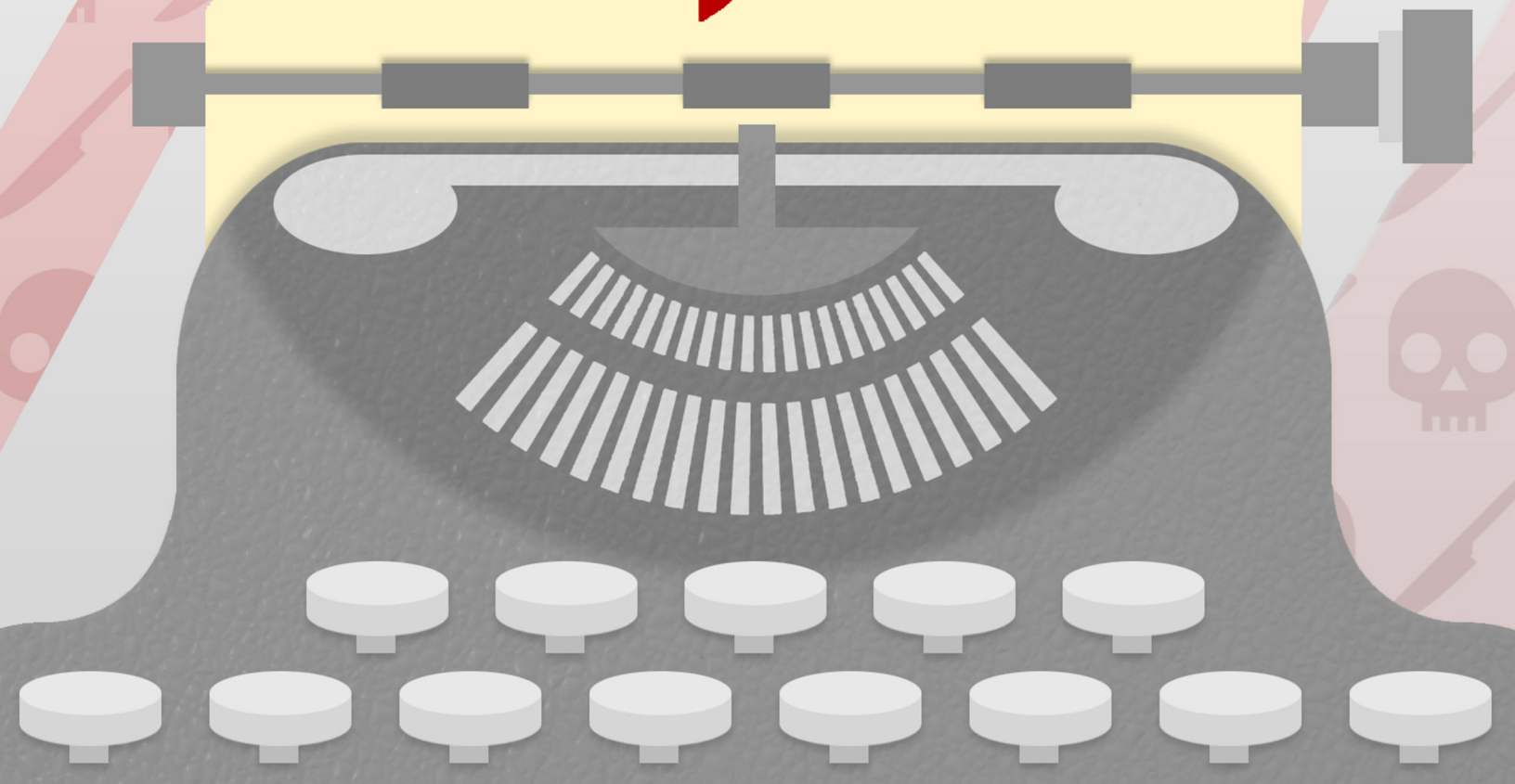




DEATH TRAP

by Ira Levin





Presented by special arrangement with Dramatists Play Service Inc.

October 4 - 31, 2018
The Vault Theater

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BAG&BAGGAGE STAFF

Scott Palmer

Founding Artistic Director

Beth Lewis

Managing Director

Cassie Greer

Associate Artistic Director

Arianne Jacques

Patron Services Manager

Alec Lugo

Marketing Assistant

Juliana De Paula

Event Manager

Jim Ricks-White

Technical Director
Resident Lighting Designer

Melissa Heller

Resident Costume Designer

Ephriam Harnsberger

Company Stage Manager

CAST

Sidney Bruhl Lawrence Siulagit
Clifford Anderson Andrew Beck‡
Myra Bruhl Morgan Coxt
Helga ten Dorp Mandana Khoshnevisant
Porter Milgrim Eric St. Cyr†

CREW/PRODUCTION TEAM

Director Scott Palmer
Costume Designer Melissa Heller
Lighting Designer & Technical Director Jim Ricks-White
Scenic Designer Tyler Buswell
Stage Manager Ephriam Harnsberger
Assistant Stage Manager & Props Master Kai Hennig^
Sound Designer Darwin Pringle^
Fight Choreographer Signe Larsent†

‡Member of the Bag&Baggage Resident Acting Company,
generously sponsored by Linda Morrisson and Andrew Hoffmann

†Bag&Baggage Associate Artist

^Bag&Baggage Emerging Artist, generously
sponsored by Brad & Linda Needham

DEATH TRAP

by Ira Levin



INTRODUCTION

"Deathtrap! A thriller in two acts. One set, five characters."

Written by Ira Levin in 1978, *Deathtrap* takes us into the world of Sidney Bruhl, a once-successful writer of stage thrillers. Sidney is in the grip of chronic writer's block when young playwright Clifford Anderson sends him a brilliant new whodunit he has written, entitled *Deathtrap*. Desperate to set Broadway alight once more, should Sidney kill the newcomer and pass the play off as his own?

Deathtrap is full of plot twists and turns, and nobody is quite who they appear to be, keeping the audience guessing until the bitter, bloody end! It holds the record for the longest-running comedy-thriller on Broadway, and was nominated for four Tony Awards, including Best Play. *Deathtrap* is the second show in Bag&Baggage's 2018-19 Season.

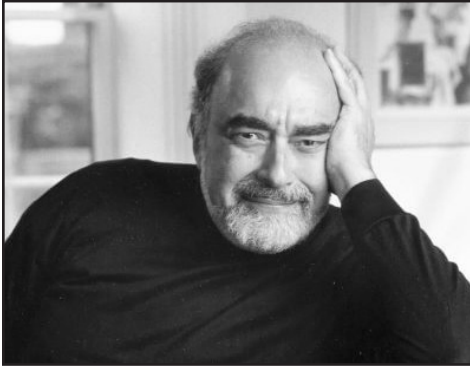


DEATH & RAP

by Ira Levin



THE PLAYWRIGHT: IRA LEVIN

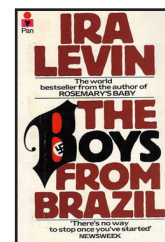
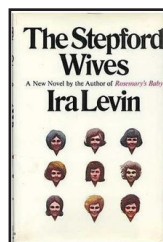
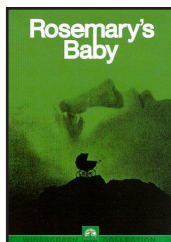


Ira Marvin Levin was a novelist and playwright, born in New York City in 1929. He grew up in both Manhattan and the Bronx, the son of a toy importer. As a child, Levin was more interested in being a magazine illustrator than taking over his father's toy business, but by the age of 15, he had set his sights firmly on making a career as a writer. As a college student, Levin studied philosophy and English, attending Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa before graduating from New York University in 1950.

Levin was 23 when he wrote his first novel, the award-winning 1953 thriller *A Kiss Before Dying*, which remains a masterpiece of crime fiction to this day. It won the Edgar Award for best first novel of the year, and was an immediate bestseller; it was twice adapted for film, in 1956 and 1991. *A Kiss Before Dying* was published just as Levin was being drafted into the Army Signal Corps, where he wrote and produced training films for the military, and began turning his artistic attention to Broadway. His first play, *No Time For Sergeants*, was an adaptation of a now-forgotten novel by Mac Hyman, and ran for over 700 performances in 1955, ultimately launching the career of its lead actor, Andy Griffith, and proving Levin's ability at crafting comedy - particularly in terms of dialogue. These artistic endeavors launched a career that spanned over 50 years, characterized by success as both a novelist and a playwright.



According to the UK's *Independent* newspaper, Levin was the king of the high-concept thriller. And although he produced more plays than he did novels (10 plays and seven novels), three of his novels were massive bestsellers, all of which were made into highly successful movies — *Rosemary's Baby* (1967), *The Stepford Wives* (1972), and *The Boys from Brazil* (1976). He was a Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America, and won the Bram Stoker Award for a lifetime's achievement from the US Horror Writers Association. He is probably best remembered for *Rosemary's Baby*, about which he commented, "I feel guilty that *Rosemary's Baby* led to *The Exorcist*, *The Omen*, etc. A whole generation has more belief in Satan. I don't believe in Satan. Of course, I didn't send back any of the royalty cheques..."



DEATH TRAP

by Ira Levin



Despite such massive literary success, Levin remained more interested in the theatrical genre, regularly producing Broadway offerings every couple of years throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Similarly to *Deathtrap's* Sidney Bruhl, Levin's playwriting career tapered off after his initial success: neither *Interlock* (1958), *General Seeger* (1962), nor the musical *Drat! That Cat!* (1966) ran in New York for longer than one week. Finding slightly more success with his later plays, Levin ultimately produced his greatest theatrical hit in 1978 with *Deathtrap*, which ran on Broadway for 1,809 performances between 1978 and 1982 before being made into a film with Michael Caine and Christopher Reeve. It was nominated for four Tony Awards in 1978: Best Play, Best Director, Featured Actor, and Featured Actress. *Deathtrap* is the 37th longest-running play in Broadway history to date, and the longest-running thriller. Levin is the recipient of three Edgar Allan Poe Awards, and served on the council of the Dramatists Guild until his death in 2007.

What people have to say about Ira Levin:



Horror novelist **Stephen King**: "Levin is the Swiss watchmaker of suspense: he makes what the rest of us do look like cheap watches in drugstores."



Thomas J. Fleming of *The New York Times Book Review*: "Mr. Levin's suspense is beautifully intertwined with everyday incidents; the delicate line between belief and disbelief is faultlessly drawn."



Levin's New York Times Obituary: "Mr. Levin's works conjured up a world full of quietly looking menace, in which anything could happen to anyone at any time. In short, the Ira Levin universe was a great deal like the real one, only more so: more starkly terrifying, more exquisitely mundane."



Kevin Guilfoile of *The Morning News*: "As unambiguous as his evil was, he presented it all matter-of-factly and let the reader provide the horror on her own, which made it all the more terrifying. Levin's readers are chased under the covers by their own fears."

DEATH & TRAP

by Ira Levin



VOCABULARY AND REFERENCES IN THE SCRIPT

Angel Street: a 1941 play by Patrick Hamilton featuring an evil man trying to convince his new wife that she is going mad. Twice made into a film, the American film version called *Gaslight* has given us the term “gaslighting”, meaning trying to make people doubt what they have seen with their own eyes.

Carbon Copies: prior to personal computers, people wrote on manual or electric typewriters and to make an immediate copy, you used carbon paper — a sheet with waxy carbon on one side which you sandwiched between two sheets of paper. As the typewriter struck each letter forcefully, a carbon replica would transfer to the second sheet. It was possible to add a second carbon and third sheet of paper, but the second copy would be fainter.

Dial ‘M’ For Murder: a murder mystery play by Frederick Knott about a wife framed for murder; the popular Alfred Hitchcock film by the same name is a close copy of the play. Bag&Baggage produced Knott’s play in October of 2014.



George C. Scott, Trish VanDevere, Liv Ullmann: popular film actors in the 1970s. Scott and VanDevere were married at the time and often appeared on screen together.



The Magic Show: a long-running Broadway musical starring Canadian magician Doug Henning. The Magic Show ran on Broadway from 1974 to 1978.

The Merv Griffin Show: a popular syndicated talk show starring Merv Griffin that ran from 1962 to 1986. The show followed the format of popular late night shows, though Merv preferred lengthy, in-depth discussions to the standard 5-6 minute talkshow interview. When broadcast from New York, many guests were Broadway actors and New York personalities and eccentrics.

Sleuth: a popular two-character comedy thriller by Anthony Shaffer, which served as a model for *Deathtrap*, where a famous mystery writer lures his wife’s lover to his country manor which houses an elaborate collection of games and puzzles. Coincidentally, the film versions of both plays starred Michael Caine.

Theatre Vérité: a play on words, referencing the film genre “cinéma vérité” — a type of documentary that records life as it happens.

Tin Pan Alley: the name given to the collection of New York City music publishers and songwriters who dominated the popular music of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The name originally referred to a specific place: West 28th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues in the Flower District of Manhattan where many music publishers set up shop around 1885.

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Peter Hurkos: a Dutch psychic who became a popular entertainer, claiming to have solved many criminal cases through his psychic powers.

quertyuiop: the letter lineup of the top line of a typewriter. This is still the standard layout on all English-language keyboards.

Reverend Sun Myung Moon: a Korean religious leader, also known for his business ventures and support for political causes. As the leader of the Unification Church, his followers were often called Moonies and the church was often regarded as a cult. Moon was famous for conducting mass weddings in which thousands were married.



Smith-Corona: the most popular American brand of typewriters, founded in 1877. The company was first headquartered in Syracuse, and still exists today, offering a line of thermal labels and thermal ribbons.

Xerox Machine: the ubiquitous name for photocopy machines. Xerox was the company to create the first commercially successful copy machines in 1959, though they were not considered a standard item in every office until the 1980s. The personal printer was not a home consumer item until 1988.

Andrew Beck and Lawrence Siulagi play Clifford Anderson and Sidney Bruhl in Bag&Baggage's production of Deathtrap.



DEATHTRAP

by Ira Levin



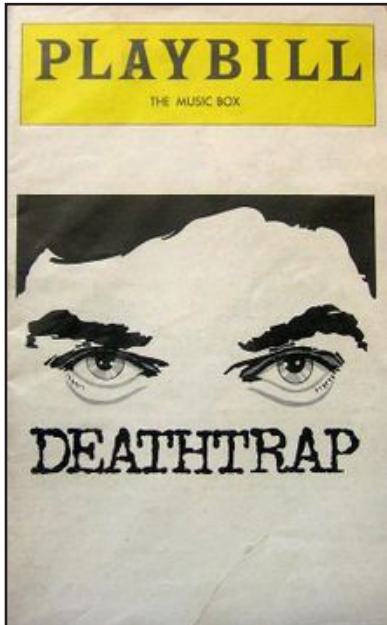
THEMES

Meta-Theatricality

Deathtrap is, essentially, one of the first postmodern plays in American theatrical tradition. From the first line — “*Deathtrap*. A play in two acts. One set, five characters...” — the play demonstrates how self-aware it is. *Deathtrap* describes itself while it writes itself and plays itself. There is a baseline of entertainment and delight in the play’s cleverness that doesn’t require any effort on the part of the actors, purely due to the nature of the play’s structure.

Anticipation and Manipulation

The tension in *Deathtrap* is constant, starting high from the very first moment of the first scene. Yet so much of this tension is never seen and never felt, with the greatest tension, perhaps, coming from the herculean efforts of all the characters pretending to be normal: acting as if nothing is wrong, while the deadliest moments of violence remain just barely submerged. It is the anticipation of violence that provides the audience with glee, having just a glimpse into the inner minds of all of the characters, and watching the way they manipulate each other as they work to pretend that all is well.



Intellect and Wit

Ira Levin has written a crisp, highly aware, and self-referential text, which also references many of its predecessors in the “thriller” genre. As writers themselves, Sidney and Clifford play the game of murder both creatively and intellectually, trying to win by being smarter, better-prepared, and more easily able to manipulate their adversaries.

Violence and Sexuality

There are several lines in the *Deathtrap* script which imply that its two male leads are gay, as well as one moment when Sidney overtly references Clifford’s sexuality; most productions choose to include a kiss between Sidney and Clifford, though this is not explicitly called for by the script. Over the years, there has been consistent criticism of *Deathtrap* as being part of the long-running history of associating homosexuality (or, most specifically, bisexuality) with being evil — a deep-seated homophobic formula that conflates sexual deviance with murder. To read *Deathtrap* as just another example of the “homicidal homosexuals” trope sells the play far short, and is also totally out of line with the way we approach sexuality as a group of theatre makers at Bag&Baggage. More interesting is the way that *Deathtrap*, through its text and staging, challenges us to consider the connections between violence and all sexual gratification — be it homo- or heterosexual.



DEATH TRAP

by Ira Levin



*Deathtrap at Bag&Baggage Productions.
Scenic Design by Tyler Buswell; Lighting
Design by Jim Ricks-White.*

OUR PRODUCTION

Deathtrap is an example of Levin's fascination with the deadly, violent undercurrents of what appears, at first glance, to be the completely mundane. But underneath the veneer of polite, upper crust New England convention lurk our darkest impulses: murder, betrayal, greed, violence, duplicity, infidelity, and slaughter. Most reviews of previous productions highlight the fact that actors tend not to let the characters take things seriously enough, and fail at maintaining the simultaneous smooth surface and bubbling undercurrent. Bag&Baggage's production works to make things immediate, complicated, tense, and serious, leaving the audience guessing and unsure of who they can trust.



DEATH TRAP

by Ira Levin



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & WRITING ACTIVITIES

Before you see the show:

1. *Deathtrap* is one of the most famous theatrical thrillers of all time. What makes a good thriller? Are there certain elements that you expect all thrillers to have?
2. *Deathtrap* is set in the 1970s, and the technology of the era (typewriters, carbon copies, Xerox machines, and land-line telephones) is partially what makes this story believable. What technology might you have to consider if you were writing a thriller today, and how might you use the technology of 2018 to help create a believable and compelling thriller?
3. All of the characters in *Deathtrap* have secrets of their own that they are keeping. Discuss how people act differently when they have a secret that they don't want anyone else to discover. What might lead a person to give their secret away?

After you see the show:

4. Bag&Baggage's production of *Deathtrap* features 60 weapons on stage. Did the presence of all these weapons affect your perception of the story playing out on stage? Why or why not?
5. In a play full of twists and turns, were there any surprises that you saw coming? If so, explain what made you suspect; if not, explain what elements of the script and/or the production worked to keep you in the dark.
6. The ending of the play is slightly different from the film version of *Deathtrap*, and people frequently think the play is over after the second-to-last scene. Explain why you think Ira Levin decided to include the final scene of the play.
7. *Deathtrap* relies heavily on fight choreography as a huge part of the storytelling of the play, and as theatre-goers, we "willingly suspend our disbelief" that the actors are actually dying on stage every night. Were you able to suspend this disbelief as you watched the play? Why or why not?
8. *Deathtrap* is very closely related to the life and experience of its writer, Ira Levin. Imagine you are writing a thriller that's very closely related to your own life. What elements of your own experience would you choose to include, and how do you think those elements could be manipulated to create a good thriller?
9. Many thrillers are more successful on the film screen than they are on stage. Do you imagine this would be true of *Deathtrap*? Explain how experiencing a thriller as a live theatre audience member is different from watching a movie thriller.

DEATH TRAP

by Ira Levin



SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

Ira Levin

The Official Ira Levin Web Site:

<http://www.iralevin.org/>

Ira Levin's Obituary in *Playbill*:

<http://www.playbill.com/article/ira-levin-author-of-hit-mystery-play-deathtrap-dies-at-78-com-145400>

Ira Levin's Obituary in *The Telegraph*:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1569375/Ira-Levin.html>

"Ira Levin" on NNDB:

<http://www.nndb.com/people/424/000044292/>

Set detail at Bag&Baggage's production of Deathtrap. Scenic Design by Tyler Buswell.



Deathtrap Themes

Murder Most Queer by Jordan Schildcrout

ISBN: 0472052322

<https://www.murdermostqueer.com/>

Deathtraps: the postmodern comedy thriller by Marvin A. Carlson

ISBN: 0253208262

"Deathtrap" on Turner Classic Movies Online

<http://www.tcm.com/this-month/article/1095252%7C0/Deathtrap.html>

"'Deathtrap' canceled after objections to nudity and gay content" by David Ng for *The Los Angeles Times*

<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/27/entertainment/la-et-cm-deathtrap-ira-levin-canceled-nudity-20120827>