

THEATER REVIEW

'Unexpected Guest' comes bearing surprises

By Paul Hyde

Arts Writer

phyde@greenvilleonline.com

Greenville Little Theatre's genially absorbing production of Agatha Christie's "The Unexpected Guest" keeps you guessing until the end.

Or, in the literate and somewhat old-fashioned verbiage of Christie, let's say the play keeps *one* guessing until the end.

That's the chief appeal of GLT's "Unexpected Guest," which opened Friday night: the piquant intrigue of the whodunit.

No one attends a play by the "Duchess of Death" expecting heart-rending poignancy or profundity.

What Christie most often offers — and delivers in this production — is a pleasant and cleverly plotted diversion, laced also with a tincture of humor.

Michael Starkwedder, the unexpected guest of the title, stumbles on a murder in a manor house in Wales.

Laura, the dead man's

wife, confesses to the killing — but she may be lying.

It turns out that Richard Warwick, the recently dispatched, was cruel and vindictive, "with a streak of sadism," as one character describes him. No surprise, several people — Laura, a local politician, and Richard's slow-witted brother Jan, among others — have a motive for murder.

And so, whodunit?

Allen McCalla's direction is brisk, direct and efficient. Rather than denying the play's melodramatic tone, McCalla embraces its heightened emotionalism, particularly when Starkwedder and Laura are on stage.

Evan Harris' Starkwedder is crisp in speech and restless in manner as he schemes to help Laura avoid the hangman for a crime she didn't — or did — commit.

Meg Foster is Harris' counterpart, playing Laura with fretful energy

Robert Simms offers a

particular treat as the crusty and avuncular Inspector Thomas.

Matt Reiser is appropriately impetuous as the mentally disabled Jan. Reiser plays Jan with a child-like innocence, as a young man without a mental filter. He says exactly what he thinks, often to comic effect.

Frank Rose deserves a commendation for his portrayal of the dead Richard Warwick, slumped in a chair for 35 minutes without twitching a muscle — not an easy acting job.

Stephanie Underwood, Constance Carey, Errol Suleyman, Bill Kennedy and Andrew Freeman round out the cast.

Suzanne McCalla's set perfectly captures the well-appointed home of a big-game hunter.

Overall, "The Unexpected Guest" provides a light and satisfying evening of suspense.

"The Unexpected Guest" continues through March 10. For tickets, call 864-233-6238.