

MURDER FOR THE MASSES

It would be easy to mistake her for an ordinary housewife. Sitting in front of her kitchen window, smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee, you would never suspect that she is an adulteress. An embezzler. An incestrian. A liar. A thief - and yes, a murderess!

Her eyes do not betray her secret, but she is responsible for over 1000 deaths all over New England, and she plans to kill again. Meet Alexa Robinson, founder of High Moon Productions, who has taken murder and made it an art.

"It's fantasy", says Robinson, "a free environment where audience members can become whoever they want. If you've always dreamed of being the stereotypical bad girl, you can be. The same goes for the person who wants to be a heroine, or a villain, or a double agent. They can become the people that have always fascinated them, providing an avenue for their fantasies to become reality".

It is this emphasis on audience participation that sets High Moon Productions above other local murder mystery companies. Too often what is billed as a mystery evening is nothing more than a stage play with the actors circulating around the tables, reciting lines from a script and dining fitfully on the smoked salmon. Verbal contact between audience and actors is limited and spontaneity is nonexistent.

"Can you imagine anything more boring," Robinson asks, "-a bunch of uninspired actors spouting preconceived alibis that the audience can't challenge? The people that come to see our shows want to play and we play right back. We don't want them to sit still and witness someone else's fantasy - we want to make their own fantasies real for them."

Her shows are the product of the relationship between the cast and audience—a symbolic proposition where the actions of one group change and redefine the actions of another. "It's like a chemical reaction using unknown elements", says Robinson, "you never know what you are going to get". Alexa admits that this penchant for the unexpected has altered the course of her productions more than once, but insists that this is what makes her shows so spectacular. Instead of being frightened by the possibility of the audience doing something outlandish, the company looks forward to these antics as a sign of the production's success. On more than one occasion audience members have stolen corpses, broken into rooms, kidnapped suspects and ransacked cars in order to learn the identity of the murderer. "If we have people lurking in the bushes and going through my purse", Alexa says, "then we know that we have a hit".

All of the performers in Alexa's troupe are expected to stay in character, whether they are eating or making a trip to the bathroom. There is no real backstage during these shows, everyone is expected to walk, talk and act like the character that they are portraying. Body contact between the cast and audience is strongly discouraged as is any sort of romantic entanglement. There are no meaningless clues to throw the audience off base, and the person who is the murderer has to physically 'commit' the crime. This last item is crucial because it ensures the realistic nature of the murder, and allows the audience the opportunity to catch someone in the act.

The plots for these performances depend upon the client who contracts the company and the sort of story line that they request. In the past, High Moon has done everything from

office espionage for a Boston corporation, to a Dallas spoof for an Inn in Vermont. They have recreated the sinking of the Titanic, a 1950's class reunion, and beamed their audience aboard the USS Enterprise for a Star Trek weekend. Yet, even though the settings may change, the motives behind the crimes remain relatively the same. "I prefer crimes of passion", says Alexa, "because they are so emotional; hate and greed and love and envy and all that stuff is the best. Premeditated stalking and blatant clues are better left on T V".

After the plot is created, Robinson has several meetings with her cast to discuss character development. There are no standard scripts for the actors to follow so the time is spent examining relationships between the characters and sketching out sequence of events. The murderer will be informed of his or her role but in most cases the identity of the criminal remains a mystery to the east. Some people do not even know that they are scheduled to die until a few minutes before the final blow. It is not unusual for one cast member to walk up to another and hand them a blood

bag and say, "Get ready to die in five minutes!". It makes the show much more realistic if the actors do not know who the murderer is, or if they are going to be a victim-and besides, it's a lot more fun to keep them guessing.

Fun, yes, but let us not forget successful. Since the company started in 1982, High Moon Productions has outlived and out done it's many competitors, including The Mystery Cafe and Susan Haley Productions. Their brand of camp, melodrama, and professionalism combine to create a show that is both accessible and exciting—a macabre Disney World for adults. Their fall line up includes a series of shows at The Mountain Top Inn of Chittenden Vermont, and a benefit for WGBH featuring Jeremy Brett (Sherlock Holmes) of "Mystery".

"It is a very hectic and strange way to make a living", Robinson confesses, "but I feel strangely at home amongst a death rattle and the ring of a gun. Getting away with murder has its own rewards!

story by Michael Gaucher



The Cast of High Moon Productions.