

College Theater Department



presents

Nov 6 – 23 | Thur - Sat at 7p | Sun at 3p

Studio Theatre

The College Theater Department sincerely thanks the library for the research support, for classes studying the script and production, as well as the cast, director, and production team working on the project.

**Advisory: This production contains simulated gunfire and depictions of violence.
Audience discretion is advised**

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Brief Synopsis

Decoding Clues, Delivering Laughs

Broadway star William Gillette, celebrated for his role as Sherlock Holmes, has invited his fellow cast members to his Connecticut castle for a weekend of holiday cheer. Festivities take a deadly turn when a guest is murdered. Gillette assumes the persona of his beloved Holmes, to unravel the mystery before the next victim falls prey. A laugh-out-loud comedy mystery that blends suspense and humor – a classic whodunit charm.

Time and Place

December 1936

Act I, Scene 1: The Palace Theatre, NYC

Act I, Scene 2: Christmas Eve, 1936, The living room of the mansion of William Gillette on the Connecticut River near East Haddam, Connecticut.

Act I, Scene 3: An Hour Later

Act II, Scene 1: Action is continuous from previous scene

Act II, Scene 2: Five minutes later

Characters

William Gillette – Good humored, full of irony and life. A dynamic and charming stage actor (based on a real man). Has made a fortune from his stage adaptation of Sherlock Holmes, whom he also plays. Recently shot in the arm in a bizarre incident, Gillette is determined to bring his Sherlockian skills to bear on solving the case.

Martha Gillette — Gillette's dotty mother, elegant though a bit foggy, somewhat vague and dithering Martha never shies away from a fight. Always willing to lob a criticism when necessary, all the same, Martha is loyal to Gillette and his gang of theatrical misfits.

Felix Geisel – The company's character actor, Felix is histrionic and arch. A true theatrical that has given his life to the stage, Felix is Gillette's best friend and occasional sidekick. Married to Madge. Actor must have great comic chops and be physically strong.

Madge Geisel – Wry and outspoken, Madge, like her husband Felix, is a lifelong theatrical. Is game for anything, but back her into a corner and she will come out swinging.

Simon Bright – The handsome young man of the company, Simon is an enthusiastic man, eager to please and find success. Simon can occasionally be overly sensitive. Recently married to Aggie, they make a charming and wonderful couple.

Aggie Wheeler – Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, Aggie is the ingénue of the company. Good-natured and kind, Aggie has had tragedy in her past, though she seems to have dealt with it well, and even moved on. Recently married to Simon, they make a charming and wonderful couple. Actress needs to have a dark side.

Inspector Goring – English and eccentric, completely one of a kind. By turns, witty and incisive, suddenly lost and dim, she is disarming in her inability to be defined. Always off the mark, and yet never far from the truth, somehow she always gets her man.

Daria Chase – Glamorous and gorgeous, Daria is the theatre critic we all love to hate. Biting, snippy, and utterly charming, you can't help but like Daria, despite the terrible things she says and writes. A wonderful sense of humor goes a long way towards endearing Daria to the audience.¹

Director's Note

The Game's Afoot embraces a delightful blend of humor, suspense, and theatrical flair—perfect for anyone who loves a good mystery with a twist of comedy. On the surface, it offers all the trappings of a classic Agatha Christie-style thriller: a secluded mansion on a snowy night, a cast of eccentric characters, and—of course—a shocking murder.

But this play gleefully turns our instinct to make order out of chaos against us, spinning a tale that is as *murderously funny* as it is suspenseful. Playwright Ken Ludwig, known for his sharp wit and theatrical imagination, balances comedy with intrigue. His work often celebrates the magic of theater itself—and this play is no exception.

The story centers on Broadway star William Gillette, known for playing Sherlock Holmes on stage. When real-life danger strikes, Gillette begins to channel his iconic role, blurring the lines between performance and reality. As the mystery deepens, Gillette and his fellow *theater folk behaving badly* treat the unfolding murder as a kind of play-within-a-play, leading to hilarious and unexpected consequences.

The characters are larger than life—each with dark secrets, inflated egos, and melodramatic flair that make every twist all the more entertaining.

The title phrase, “the game’s afoot,” has a figurative meaning: an exciting endeavor or challenging situation is underway. It originates from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* and was

¹ <http://data.instantencore.com/pdf/1048508/Audition+Notice+Games+Afoot.pdf>

later popularized by Sherlock Holmes, signaling the start of a thrilling hunt or unfolding drama.

At its core, *The Game's Afoot* is pure escapism—a fast-paced, laugh-filled mystery that invites audiences to sit back and enjoy the ride. Our production aims to bring this theatrical comedy to life in all its over-the-top glory.

Join us as the mystery of this "whodunnit" unfolds—you won't want to miss a clue!

~AB

A Brief History of WhoDunnit

By Emily Martin



The Whodunit mystery is a genre that has appealed to readers for centuries. But what is a Whodunit mystery? Where did the genre come from and how did it become so popular? And what are the best Whodunit stories out there? I'm here to answer all of your questions about Whodunits: what they are, where they came from, and where to find them. Stick around!

A typical Whodunit story presents a crime of some sort right at the start. From there, an astute investigator, either amateur or professional, is called in to solve the case. But the true appeal of the Whodunit is that the readers become just as involved in solving the crime as the investigators themselves. We as readers are presented with all of the

clues just as the characters in the story see them, which means we have all the tools to crack the case along with our main character.

A good Whodunit story offers up a mystery like a puzzle that is complicated to solve but not impossible. In the end, we as readers might not have been able to figure out the culprit of the case before our gifted investigator did so. But looking back, we realize we had all the puzzle pieces to fit the case together, and that's thrilling and satisfying. And for so many readers, that's why this genre never gets old.

But where did Whodunit stories come from? Detective fiction dates all the way back to the mid-1800s when Edgar Allan Poe wrote *The Murders of Rue Morgue* in 1844, and shortly after, in 1868, Wilkie Collins wrote the first detective novel, *The Moonstone*. Mystery suspense stories continued to rise in popularity through the late 1800s, mostly with the distribution of crime stories in dime novels. Many of these crime stories used Chicago as their backdrop, and to this day, Chicago remains a classic setting for Whodunits and mystery stories.

Although Whodunits were being written and voraciously read long before 1930, this is when the term "Whodunit" was officially coined. In his review of the detective novel *Half-Mast Murder*, News of Books reviewer Donald Gordon used the term "Whodunit" to describe the story. And Gordon couldn't have come up with a more apt term any sooner, because as he was writing and defining what a Whodunit is, the world was right in the middle of the Golden Age for mystery fiction.

The Golden Age of mystery fiction happened in the 1920s and 30s, and many of the authors of these Whodunits were British (or were inspired by British authors). Some of the most enduring mystery writers come out of this time period, including Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie. Contemporary cozy mysteries are still very much inspired by this important period in the history of Whodunit stories.

Mysteries from the Golden Age became so ubiquitous that certain patterns and tropes began appearing: a cast of questionable characters, a cozy country home as a setting, locked rooms, red herrings, and so on. Yes, there is a certain pleasure and comfort in the fact that these Whodunits from the Golden Age had a predictable formula. But the more stories continued to be written in this formula, the more people began to push away from the expected. And so from this period of tried and tested mystery tropes arose a new type of Whodunit: hard-boiled crime fiction.

Think of hard-boiled crime fiction as America's answer to the polite British Whodunit. These Whodunits were louder, more violent, and more emotionally raw. While the general storyline still followed the conventions of a classic Whodunit, hard-boiled crime fiction added a little edge and darkness to a genre that was maybe getting a bit more polite than any murder mystery has a right to be. While the Golden Age of mysteries in Britain was at its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, hard-boiled crime fiction really took off

in the mid-1930s through the 1950s. Popular classic writers of this genre include Dashiell Hammett, James M. McCain, and Raymond Chandler.

The contemporary *Whodunit* takes notes from the genre's history, taking influences from the past and adding new twists to make the ideas fresh again. Some authors, like Walter Mosley, go for the grittier hard-boiled detective story. Others, like Ruth Ware, are clearly influenced by Golden Age authors. Meanwhile, other authors harken back to the mysteries of the earliest Whodunit novels, before we even knew what Whodunits were.

But no matter what their influences are, these authors are adding something new to the genre. And yet all of these Whodunits have that one important thing in common: a compelling mystery that we can't wait to solve.²

About the Playwright



Ken Ludwig may well be the most performed playwright of his generation. He has had six productions on Broadway and eight in London's West End. His 34 plays and musicals are staged throughout the United States and around the world every night of the year. They have been produced in over 20 languages in more than 30 countries, and many have become standards of the American repertoire.

His first play, *Lend Me a Tenor*, was produced on Broadway and in London by Andrew Lloyd Webber. It won two Tony Awards and was called "one of the classic comedies of the 20th century" by *The Washington Post*. *Crazy For You* was on Broadway for five years, on the West End for three, and won the Tony and Olivier Awards for Best Musical. It has been revived twice in the West End and is currently touring Japan. Since its European premiere at Chichester Festival Theatre in 2022, Ludwig's adaptation of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* has had hundreds of international productions.

In addition, he has won the Edwin Forrest Award for Contributions to the American Theatre, two Laurence Olivier Awards, two Helen Hayes Awards, the Charles MacArthur Award, and the Edgar Award for Best Mystery of the Year. He was also

² Martin, Emily. "A Brief History of Whodunit." <https://www.novelsuspects.com/articles/a-brief-history-of-whodunit/>

nominated for an Emmy Award for writing the Kennedy Center Honors. His other plays include *Moon Over Buffalo*; *Leading Ladies*; *Baskerville*; *Sherwood*; *Twentieth Century*; *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*; *A Fox on the Fairway*; *A Comedy of Tenors*; *The Game's Afoot*; *Shakespeare in Hollywood*; and *Moriarty*. They have starred, among others, Alec Baldwin, Carol Burnett, Tony Shaloub, Joan Collins, and Kristin Bell.

His book *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, published by Penguin Random House, has been a bestseller and is out this year in a new, expanded edition. It won the Falstaff Award for Best Shakespeare Book of the Year. His essays on theatre are published in the Yale Review, and he gives the Annual Ken Ludwig Playwriting Scholarship at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival.

His first opera, *Tenor Overboard*, opened at the Glimmerglass Festival in July 2022. His most recent world premieres were *Lend Me A Soprano* and *Moriarty*, and his newest plays and musicals include *Pride and Prejudice Part 2: Napoleon at Pemberley*, *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard*, *Beginner's Luck*, and *Easter Parade*.

He has been commissioned to write plays by Agatha Christie Limited, the Royal Shakespeare Company, The Old Globe Theatre, and the Bristol Old Vic.³

Notes from the Playwright

In his introductory notes to *The Game's Afoot*, Ludwig writes:

Why do mysteries grab us?

About four years ago our family went on vacation in England, and during the London portion of the trip we went to the theatre and saw The Mousetrap by Agatha Christie. As you may know, The Mousetrap is the longest-running play in history. When we saw it, it had been running for fifty-six years (be still my heart) and it's still running today as I write this.

As I watched the play unfold that night and saw the joy that it gave to our entire family, I resolved to try and write a mystery of my own. However, I knew even then that I wouldn't have a chance of writing a good one until I figured out the allure of mysteries on the stage, and how and why the great ones entertain us so powerfully.

I started by reading every good mystery play I could lay my hands on...What I learned from all my reading is that the greatest mystery plays written in the past hundred years have certain elements in common, and by recognizing these elements, I was able to understand more deeply the genre I was trying to tackle. Here is a summary of some of the lessons I learned from my foray into the literature of mysteries.

³ <https://www.kenludwig.com/about-1>

1. *The greatest mystery plays are plotted meticulously...When we speak of plot, it's worth remembering the definition of plot offered by E.M. Forster in his book Aspects of the Novel. He illustrates the difference between story and plot as follows:*

"The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. The time sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: "The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king." This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development.

In other words, a plot requires causality. It's not just "and then and then and then."...

2. *The plots of great mystery plays are relentlessly linear. Mysteries take us on a ride, starting at the beginning and driving straight through to the end. Like roller coasters, the best mysteries may twist and turn, climb and plunge, but they're always headed straight forward and zoom on to the finish.*

Because the best mystery plays are so linear, there is rarely time for subplots...Of course mysteries sometimes contain red herrings: developments that make us believe that someone other than the culprit committed the crime. And in the best mysteries, the red herrings are woven into the forward motion of the play.

3. *The greatest mystery plays, like the greatest plays of any kind, somehow, almost magically, have resonances to other, deeper layers of meaning...mysteries speak to something central to us all. We try to find out who the killer is just the way we ask other, deeper questions of identity. We want answers to vital questions that can make the world more rational and sensible because answers give us peace of mind.*

4. *Mysteries by their very nature contain certain recurring themes. These usually include questions about death, about justice, and about appearance versus reality...And this is one of the reasons that we find mysteries so endlessly fascinating: Mysteries are journeys trying to answer the question of who we really are.*

5. *Finally, what we're really seeking when we look for answers in a mystery is a sense of order. In *The Game's Afoot*; or *Holmes for the Holidays*, I have the inspector in the play, Inspector Goring, say to the protagonist, William Gillette (the actor who played Sherlock Holmes on stage for over thirty years): "Order from chaos. Order from chaos. It's what I do."*

And that's what mysteries do. They fit the pieces together.⁴

⁴ Ludwig, Ken. *The Game's Afoot*. Concord Theatricals Corp. October 2012.

Sherlock Holmes

The most famous figure in detective fiction, the creation of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930). His solutions of crime and mysteries were related in a series of 60 stories that mainly appeared in the *Strand Magazine* between 1891 and 1927. The character was based on Dr Joseph Bell of the Edinburgh Infirmary, whose methods of deduction suggested a system that Holmes developed into a science: the observation of the minutest details and apparently insignificant circumstances scientifically interpreted.

Dr Watson, Holmes' friend and assistant, was a skit on Doyle himself, and Baker Street acquired lasting fame through his writings. (*Brewer's Dictionary of Fame and Fable*) Sherlock Holmes, fictional character created by the Scottish writer Arthur Conan Doyle. The prototype for the modern mastermind detective, Holmes first appeared in Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* of 1887. The first collection of the Holmes' tales, published as *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, appeared in 1892. As the world's first and only "consulting detective," he pursued criminals throughout Victorian and Edwardian London, the south of England, and continental Europe.

Conan Doyle modeled Holmes's methods and mannerisms on those of Dr. Joseph Bell, who had been his professor at the University of Edinburgh Medical School. In particular, Holmes's uncanny ability to gather evidence based upon his honed skills of observation and deductive reasoning paralleled Bell's method of diagnosing a patient's disease. Holmes offered some insight into his method, claiming that "When you have excluded the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." His detecting abilities become clear, though no less amazing, when explained by his companion, Dr. John H. Watson, who recounts the criminal cases they jointly pursue. Although Holmes rebuffs praise, declaring his abilities to be "elementary," the oft-quoted phrase "Elementary, my dear Watson," never actually appears in Conan Doyle's writings.

Claiming that Holmes distracted him "from better things," Conan Doyle famously in 1893 (*The Final Problem*) attempted to kill him off; during a violent struggle on Switzerland's Reichenbach Falls, both Holmes and his nemesis, Professor Moriarty, are plunged over the edge of the precipice. Popular outcry against the demise of Holmes was great; men wore black mourning bands, the British royal family was distraught, and more than 20,000 readers cancelled their subscriptions to the popular *Strand Magazine*, in which Holmes regularly appeared. By popular demand, Conan Doyle resurrected his detective in the story *The Adventure of the Empty House* (1903).⁵

⁵ Wilson, Philip K.. "Sherlock Holmes". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 8 Jul. 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sherlock-Holmes>. Accessed 16 September 2025.



William Hooker Gillette, c. 1890s. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica

William Gillette: Five ways he transformed how Sherlock Holmes looks and talks

by Tom de Castella

A 1916 silent movie featuring Sherlock Holmes - long presumed lost - is due to have its premiere in Paris [2015]. It stars a man who changed the way we see Conan Doyle's famous sleuth forever.

He was the first great Sherlock Holmes. But few will have heard of US actor William Gillette.

He is thought to be a distant relation of the family behind Gillette razors, wrote plays about the American civil war, patented a noise to imitate the sound of a galloping horse and built an enormous castle in Connecticut. But it is his Holmes that fascinates people today.

And until three months ago, it seemed that no-one would ever see it. Gillette adapted Sherlock Holmes for the stage in 1899 and played Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's detective more than 1,000 times.

He made only one film, the 1916 silent movie version of Sherlock Holmes. For decades the movie was presumed lost, one of the great missing links of Sherlockiana. Then in October 2014 it was discovered at the Cinematheque Francaise, a film archive in Paris.

"At last we get to see for ourselves the actor who kept the first generation of Sherlockians spellbound," says Professor Russell Merritt, who has been researching

the film's origins. "As far as Holmes is concerned, there's not an actor dead or alive who hasn't consciously or intuitively played off Gillette."

Not only was Gillette the Benedict Cumberbatch of his day. He was the actor who decided - perhaps more than any other - how Holmes looks and talks, and whose relationship with Conan Doyle may have breathed new life into the Sherlock Holmes franchise.

Here are five ways Gillette created the Holmes we know today:

Curved pipe

Two props evoke Sherlock Holmes above all others. The first is the deerstalker. Conan Doyle's stories never mentioned his distinctive headgear - it was given to Holmes by

the illustrator Sidney Paget when the stories were published in the *Strand Magazine* in 1891.



The other crucial object is his pipe. It's not an ornament but a part of Holmes's deductive ritual. "It is quite a three pipe problem, and I beg that you won't speak to me for fifty minutes," he says to Watson in the Red-Headed League.

The books describe a "black clay pipe thrusting out like the bill of some strange bird". Paget gave Holmes a straight pipe.

But William Gillette's 1899 play made a crucial change. The shaft of the pipe was no longer straight but curved.

"The story goes that he's able to deliver his lines while still smoking. A more traditional pipe and his hand would have been in front of his mouth," says Alex Werner, curator of the Museum of London's ongoing exhibition, "Sherlock Holmes: The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die."

The curved pipe stuck in the popular imagination and became "iconic", Werner says.

There have been occasional amendments though. In the 1988 film *Without a Clue*, Michael Caine puffs on a more ostentatiously curvy pipe. And in the recent BBC TV series, Benedict Cumberbatch has a nicotine patch instead.

'Elementary, my dear fellow'

The most Holmesian phrase - "Elementary my dear Watson" - is never uttered in the books. Gillette is perhaps the man who did most to bring it in, although he never used the exact phrase.

In the play he wrote the line: "Elementary my dear fellow." Others subsequently swapped "fellow" with "Watson".

PG Wodehouse is often credited with this swap in his spoof novel *Psmith*. But the Oxford English Dictionary queries this.

It seems that the term was already being used in newspapers before Wodehouse's 1915 novel. So some uncertainty remains as to who coined it.

Conan Doyle included the term "elementary" in Holmes's deductive vernacular. He also included "my dear Watson". But never in the same sentence.

It seems that Gillette almost put the two together. And others later finished the job. The line, "Elementary my dear Watson" probably became famous when the talkies came in - it was used in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* in 1929, which starred Clive Brook.

The other great 'Sherlock Holmes' actors

Basil Rathbone (1892-1967): English actor who played Holmes in 14 films between 1939 and 1946, still probably the most well-known screen incarnation of the role; Rathbone's films were the first to update Holmes and portray him pitting his wits against the Nazis

Jeremy Brett (1933-95): Starred in four series of Granada TV's *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, an attempt to adapt Conan Doyle's stories faithfully for television

Benedict Cumberbatch (1976-): Star of BBC's *Sherlock*, which re-imagines Holmes and Dr. Watson in 21st Century London.



Image from Museum of London,
William Gillette

Suave dressing gown

Conan Doyle describes Holmes' dressing gown as variously blue, purple or mouse-colored, according to Roger Johnson, editor of the *Sherlock Holmes Journal*. However, that's all the reader is told.

Johnson says Gillette's dressing gown moved Holmes slightly up-market: "Gillette had a really rather plush, splendid dressing gown and some of the subsequent actors adopted similar ones."

Before Gillette, Holmes inhabited, if not a seedy world, then a dangerous one. He employed a reformed crook as one of his assistants. The luxuriant dressing gown is part of a more louche, languid Holmes who may inject cocaine on stage but mixes with a more high society crowd.

Paget had drawn the dressing gown as "slightly ragged", says Werner. "When Gillette took on the role the dressing gown was very glamorous, he is quite the suave bachelor. It's the key costume," says Werner.

Years later, Conan Doyle gave Eille Norwood, another actor to play Holmes, a vividly patterned dressing gown, perhaps inspired by Gillette's version.

Cumberbatch has made the dark grey, double-breasted Belstaff Milford part of his look. But he continues the tradition of lounging around in a dressing gown. His most commonly used robe is pure silk, navy-colored with a satin stripe.

He shaped America's view of Holmes

Gillette was the first American stage actor to take on this most English of roles. His delivery mixed an upper crust English accent with North American twang. "You can hear the same sort of thing when Katharine Hepburn tries to speak in an English way in *The African Queen*," says Johnson.

Gillette's 1916 silent film, though set in London, was shot in the US. He also brought an American influence to Holmes's appearance.

In a previous play, *Secret Service*, there was something of the matinee idol about him. His Holmes contrasted with the prominent nose and cheekbones of a Basil Rathbone, Douglas Wilmore or Benedict Cumberbatch.

At the start of the 20th Century, the American illustrator Frederic Dorr Steele drew Holmes for various US publications. His model was Gillette.

"That's what most Americans saw Holmes as. Whereas in Britain it was the illustrations of [Sidney] Paget in the *Strand* magazine," Johnson says.

And his reputation continued to grow. Calm and charismatic, is how silent film buffs describe him. Few have seen the 1916 film but even the photos show how naturally he took to the role, says Johnson. "He's marvelous. People say he is Sherlock Holmes."

Gillette was king of the silent movie age but when the talkies arrived, it was time for another kind of Holmes to emerge. For many fans today, it is Rathbone who became and remains the archetype.

He helped inspire Conan Doyle to 'reboot' Holmes

Conan Doyle killed off Holmes in print in 1893. A stage adaptation he wrote failed to get off the ground, which might explain his willingness to allow Gillette to write his own.

When the American asked whether the script could see Holmes married, Conan Doyle replied: "You may marry him, murder him, or do what you like to him."

He seemed to trust Gillette implicitly, says Werner. They'd hit it off as soon as they met. According to Charles Higham's biography, Gillette alighted from a train dressed as Holmes before approaching Conan Doyle's carriage and examining him through a magnifying glass.

"Unquestionably an author," he announced, to Conan Doyle's amusement.

But there was another factor beside friendship - money.

"I believe however that there is a fortune in the other - Sherlock Holmes," Conan Doyle writes in a letter dated 18 June 1899. "Gillette has made a great play out of it, and he is a great actor."

He believed it was destined to be a hit. Royalties would have been the primary motivation but there was also a sense that it might create a new interest in reading the books. "It has such an enormous initial advertisement," the letter continued. "I am not usually over sanguine but I do have great hopes for this. It is our trump card."

Conan Doyle began writing *The Hound of the Baskervilles* while the play was on. Did the drama subtly influence the way Conan Doyle wrote the later stories? Johnson thinks not: "Some people say the character in the later stories is not the same but I can't detect any change."

Whatever the aesthetic impact, Gillette's success - this "trump card" - would have reassured Conan Doyle that there was still a public appetite for Holmes. As he wrote when he first read Gillette's stage adaptation: "It's good to see the old chap back."⁶

Quotes Used in the Play

The characters in *The Game's Afoot*, love to quote Shakespeare and other works of literature within the play.

GILLETTE: "I am not shaped for sportive tricks / nor made to court an amorous looking glass... I am rudely stamped and want love's majesty / to strut before a wanton, ambling nymph...And that so lamely and unfashionable that dogs bark at me as I halt by them;" — *Richard III*, Act I, scene i

MADGE: "What country, friend is this?"

FELIX: "It is Illyria, lady."

MADGE: "My brother, he is in Elysium. Perchance he is not drowned! What think you, Sailor?"

FELIX: "It is perchance that you yourself were saved."
— *Twelfth Night*, Act I, scene ii

FELIX: "Spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!"
— *King Lear* Act III, scene ii

GILLETTE: "But even then the morning cock cried loud
And at the sound it shrunk in haste away."
— *Hamlet*, Act I, scene ii

FELIX: "The knave turns fool that runs away."
— *King Lear*, Act II, scene iv

GILLETTE: "Where's my fool? Ho! I think the world's asleep!"
— *King Lear*, Act I, scene iv

FELIX: "To sleep, perchance to dream."

⁶ de Castella, Tom. "William Gillette: Five ways he transformed how Sherlock Holmes looks and talks." BBC News Magazine, 26 January 2015. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-30932322>

—*Hamlet*, Act III, scene i

GILLETTE: “To sleep, no more.”

—*Hamlet*, Act III, scene i

GILLETTE: “Stir up the Athenian youth to merriment,
Awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth!”

—*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act I, scene i

GILLETTE: “When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out
Contagion to this world!”

—*Hamlet*, Act III, scene ii

INSPECTOR: “The evil that men do lives after them! The good is oft interr’d with their bones!”

—*Julius Caesar*, Act 3, scene ii

INSPECTOR: “Blood will have blood!”

—*Macbeth*, Act 3, scene iv

INSPECTOR: “Is this a dagger which I see before me?”

—*Macbeth*, Act 2, scene i

INSPECTOR: “Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty!”

—*Macbeth*, Act I, scene v

Naming Names

The characters in *The Game’s Afoot* love to reference other famous characters from literature, stage, and screen.⁷

Hamlet’s mother

Hamlet dramatizes the prince’s revenge on his uncle Claudius for murdering Hamlet’s father and marrying Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude. With themes of treachery, revenge, incest, and moral corruption, *Hamlet* is among the most powerful and influential tragedies in English literature.

⁷ *The Game’s Afoot Study Guide*. www.irtlive.com. Accessed 16, September 2025.

Henry V

Henry V focuses on events surrounding the Battle of Agincourt (1415) during the Hundred Years' War. While in his earlier *Henry IV* plays Shakespeare had depicted Henry (1386-1422) as a wild, undisciplined lad, in *Henry V* the prince has become a mature young man.

Henry VIII

Henry VIII is believed to be a collaboration between William Shakespeare and John Fletcher. It is based on the life of Henry VIII of England (1491-1547), known for his six marriages and for his role in the separation of the Church of England from the Roman Catholic Church.

Othello

Othello revolves around a Moorish general in the Venetian army, Othello, who is falsely persuaded by his trusted ensign, Iago, that his new wife, Desdemona, is having an affair. With its themes of racism, love, jealousy, and betrayal, *Othello* is still widely performed.

Portia

Porcia Catonis (70–43 BCE) was the second wife of Marcus Junius Brutus, the most famous of Julius Caesar's assassins; in his play *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare spelled her name as Portia.

Richard III

Shakespeare's *Richard III* depicts the rise to power and subsequent short reign of Richard III of England (1452-1485). Shakespeare paints Richard as an ugly hunchback and a cruel tyrant; the accuracy of Shakespeare's portrayal has been much debated over the centuries.

Sir Toby Belch

Sir Toby Belch is a character in William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. He is considered one of William Shakespeare's finest comic characters, an ambiguous mix of high spirits and low cunning, a force for vitality, noise, and good cheer.

Croesus

Croesus was the ancient Greek king of Lydia from 560 to 547 BCE, renowned for his wealth. In Greek and Persian cultures, the name of Croesus became a synonym for a wealthy man; today, the expression "rich as Croesus" is still used to indicate great wealth.

Keats

John Keats (1795 –1821) was an English Romantic poet, one of the most beloved of all English poets. Today his poems and letters are some of the most popular in English literature.

Professor Moriarty

Professor James Moriarty is the nemesis of Sherlock Holmes. He is something of a Mafia godfather; he protects nearly all of the criminals of England in exchange for their obedience and a share of their profits.

Eugene O'Neill

Playwright Eugene O'Neill (1888–1953) introduced the realism of Chekhov, Ibsen, and Strindberg to American drama. Living on the fringes of society, his characters struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations, but usually slide into disillusionment and despair.

Saint Joan

Born a peasant, Joan of Arc (c. 1412–1431) claimed that she saw visions and heard the voices of saints. She supported Charles VII and helped recover France from English domination in the Hundred Years' War. Captured by the English, she was tried for heresy, idolatry, and witchcraft, and was burned at the stake at the age of 19. She was canonized in 1920.

Shelley

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) was one of the major English Romantic poets and is regarded by critics as one of the finest lyric poets in the English language.

Ulysses

Ulysses is the Latin name for Odysseus, legendary Greek king of Ithaca and the hero of Homer's *Odyssey*. Renowned for his brilliance and guile, he is most famous for his Trojan Horse subterfuge and for the ten eventful years he took to return home.

Dr. Watson

Dr. John H. Watson is the friend, confidante, and biographer of Sherlock Holmes. A physician like Holmes creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Watson served in the British Army Medical Corps in Afghanistan, but was discharged following an injury received in battle.

Astaire and Rodgers

Fred Astaire (1899–1987) and Ginger Rogers (1911–1995) were iconic dance partners who made nine motion pictures together between 1933 and 1939, most notably *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935), and *Swing Time* (1936).

Lionel Barrymore

A member of the theatrical Barrymore family (and great-uncle of Drew Barrymore), Lionel Barrymore (1878–1954) is perhaps best known as the kindly Otto Kringlein in *Grand Hotel* (1932) and as the villainous Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946).

Nick and Nora Charles

Nick and Nora Charles are fictional characters created by Dashiell Hammett in his novel *The Thin Man* (1934). The characters were featured in a series of six *Thin Man* films starring William Powell and Myrna Loy between 1934 and 1947.

Joan Crawford

In her long career, Joan Crawford (1904–1977) moved from chorus girl to ingénue to leading lady to character actress. Although her roles often featured a bitter edge, she won the 1945 Academy Award for Best Actress as a hard-working, self-sacrificing mother in *Mildred Pierce*.

Clark Gable

Clark Gable (1901–1960) was a leading man in more than 60 motion pictures, including *It Happened One Night* (1934, Academy Award for Best Actor), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), and *The Misfits* (1961).

Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) was an Austrian-born German politician and the leader of the Nazi Party. He was at the center of World War II and the Holocaust.

Myrna Loy

Myrna Loy (1905–1993) started her silent film career as an exotic femme fatale, but with the advent of sound she was recast as the witty, urbane, professional woman. She is perhaps best remembered for her role as Nora Charles in six *Thin Man* films (1934–1947).

Franklin D. Roosevelt

FDR (1882–1945), served as President of the United States from 1933 to his death in 1945. Elected for four consecutive terms, he remains the only president to serve more than eight years. He led the United States through the Great Depression and World War II.

Rosalind Russell

Rosalind Russell (1907–1976) is perhaps best known for her film roles as a catty gossip in *The Women* (1939) and a fast-talking newspaper reporter in *His Girl Friday* (1940). She played the glamorous, eccentric title role in *Auntie Mame* both on Broadway (1957) and on film (1958).

Sacco and Vanzetti

Nicola Sacco (1891–1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888–1927) were Italian-Americans executed for murdering two men during an armed robbery in 1920. Today it is believed that the men were convicted largely because of anti-Italian prejudice and their anarchist beliefs.

Wallis Simpson

Wallis Simpson (1896–1986) was a twice-married American socialite who became the mistress of Edward, Prince of Wales. After Edward’s accession as king, his desire to marry a divorcee threatened to cause a constitutional crisis in the United Kingdom, leading to his abdication.

Analysis Tools

Things to think about prior to performance

- Consider Ken Ludwig’s “notes from the playwright.” Can you think of examples of the essential elements of a good murder mystery? Do you agree with his analysis of why we enjoy a murder mystery?
- The play, set in 1936, contains a number of cultural and literary references from that era. Refer to pages 16 and 17 of this guide.
- Are you familiar with any of the Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie stories?
- Ludwig is enamored of the theater and theater people. Imagine writing a play about a historic character, who was a famous actor, William Gillette. Why might Ludwig choose Gillette?



- Have you ever heard of William Gillette or the “Gillette Castle” in Ohio? See the YouTube link in this section.

Things to watch for in Performance

- The first scene of the play is a play within a play. But there are many elements in which the characters, who are “actors,” find themselves as if they are in a performance. Can you extract them from the piece?
- Did you figure out who was “the murderer” before it was revealed in the piece?
- Look for the “hidden” aggressions that each character has against one another and why.
- Ludwig says, “Mysteries are journeys trying to answer the question of who we really are.” Choose one of the characters in the show and consider the question of who they really are. What personal qualities did they reveal through their actions, intentional or not?

Things to think about after the performance

- *The Game's Afoot* is a murder mystery, but Ludwig chose to make it a comedy as well. Why do you think he made this choice? How do you imagine you might have responded to this show if it wasn't funny?
- In addition to the references to Shakespeare plays, *The Game's Afoot* has several other theatrical references. Which ones did you notice?
- Notice the theatrical FX within the murder genre. Were they effective?
- Notice the “dressing” of the set. How do the “decorations” inform you about who lives in this space?
- Notice the way the character are dressed. Did the color and cut of the of their dress effect your opinion of their character?

Other Analysis Tools

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? Certainly, the last few minutes, but, more importantly, the last thirty seconds? In that time, WHAT happens or is said, and what does that say about what the play is “about”? In a nutshell, how do the cast/characters drive their point(s) home?
- And what is the significance of the title? Why did the playwright decide that this was the most quintessential title for this work?



Vinny Scanio as “Professor Moriarty”
and Alexander Wood as “Sherlock
Holmes”

Photo Credit: Corey Minkanic

Additional Information

The running time for this production is approximately two hours and fifteen minutes, which includes one, fifteen-minute intermission.

Please join us for a pre-show discussion Thursday, November 6 at 5:45pm in MAC 117, the area commonly called the “fishbowl,” preceding the preview performance. Note that the pre-show discussions will include the director and designers and will be a discussion on the approach to this production.

There will also be a post-show discussion following the Friday, November 14 performance. The post-show will be with the director, cast, and crew, and we will be fielding questions from the audience.

Please join us!