



Masters of Mystery

Get mixed in with this gang of North Carolina actors, and you're in for it (a treat, that is). By **Katie Snowden Crawford**

If you have an upcoming dinner engagement in the Triangle, ready your alibi. You might find yourself in another triangle altogether—one full of love, lies, and laughter. If the Mafia's not to blame, Marjorie Strauss may be. She masterminds a theatrical troupe that just can't be trusted.

It's *A Mystery*, North Carolina's sneakiest gang of actors, takes murder-mystery dinner theater to the max. The group leads audiences through a thrilling game of whodunit. But watch your back. Once they've finished off the victim, the fun is just beginning.

Detective Work It's *A Mystery* provides entertainment to corporations and organizations across North Carolina, along

with skill-oriented and outside-the-office activities for employees. "In mystery dinner theater, there is a closer tie between characters and the audience," explains Marjorie. Performers act among the audience members and hold conversations with them throughout their meals. While cocktails are served, actors emerge in character and mingle with guests. Whether the setting is a Hollywood awards show or a motivational seminar, a murder always occurs.

The Plot Thickens Don't assume you'll sit back and relax at an *It's A Mystery* performance. To get the most enjoyment out of the night, audience members must play along. Keeping eyes and ears open for clues throughout, they take notes with provided paper and pencils. Those present

TOP: It's A Mystery actors make audience members part of the show by performing among them rather than on a stage. **ABOVE:** Actors (from left to right) Solomon Gibson III, Susanne Arrington, Jenifer Crowell, Rowell Gorman, Marjorie Strauss, John Lanier, and Kaki Carl prepare for their performance.

The troupe is often hired to perform for the employees of corporations. Before a show, cast members secretly collect employee names and company tidbits to work into the plot.



must listen carefully to personal grudges and past conflicts dredged up by characters.

Actors inject every mystery with audience interaction and details relevant to the client. An organization's president, for instance, may be mentioned in dialogue, and audience members offer their assessments of the unfolding plots.

Although you can be sure one of the characters will be mysteriously "whacked" before the main course comes out, "Nothing is done in poor taste," says Marjorie. "The shows are lighthearted, and audiences are always receptive. It's theater without being heavy and serious."

Individuals at each table must work together to solve the crime by questioning suspects and deliberating to determine the guilty party. After an exciting night of twists and turns, the first table-turned-detective-agency to nail the culprit and reveal a motive wins a prize.

Getting Away With Murder

While It's A Mystery performances are always enjoyable, each of its nine themed shows centers around more than just entertainment. "Companies like the team-building element for their employees," says Marjorie.

The troupe's client list ranges from major companies, such as AT&T and IBM, to local country clubs. Many are repeat customers. "For them, it's a diversion from the outside world," Marjorie explains.

Her group will put on more than 30 shows by the end of this year. Performing the same basic routines so regularly means minimal rehearsals, but the actors keep it fresh by relying on clever improvisation. "We still crack ourselves up," Marjorie says. Susanne Arrington, the group's scriptwriter and fellow actor, calls the shows "living organisms," saying they get better as they evolve.

Show themes range from Hollywood drama in *Lights, Camera, Murder!* to musical mayhem in *Kill the Music*. Each story is told with the help of such notable characters as Will N. Lighten and Vidi O'Taper. Audience members are encouraged to dress appropriately, donning western wear for *Country Fried Capers* and seventies attire for *Death by Disco*.

Her History Marjorie knew as a child that she was born to be a comedic actress. "I had that constant feeling of wanting to perform," she says. "The best part of acting for me has always been making people laugh and enjoy themselves."

As a third-generation Durham native, she was never interested in going to New York or Los Angeles to pursue her dreams. Instead she stayed close to her family and attended Duke University, where she graduated with degrees in drama and psychology in 1983. "There's a large number of talented North Carolina actors who never chose to go to bigger markets," she says. Hoping to tap into that wealth of talent, Marjorie founded It's A Mystery in 1996. Although there are other similar troupes across the country who share the name, that's just coincidence, Marjorie says.

Their Motives It's A Mystery members are an atypical crime-drama family. Five out of its seven actors have been involved with the troupe since it began, and some drive as much as three-and-a-half hours to make performances.

Each member has a regular full-time job, and some are mothers and fathers. "This is the best acting experience I've ever had. You get to create on the fly, and it isn't time-consuming," says actor Solomon Gibson III. "It's an all-around wonderful experience."

Acting for a live audience provides "instant gratification," says Susanne. "We get to interact with people and see the final product of what we're doing."

"It's all about having a great time and bringing people joy," Marjorie adds. "Standing ovations still bring me to tears." ●

Need a little good-natured mayhem in your life? Contact Marjorie's troupe of troublemakers through their Web site, www.itsamysterync.com.