Murder on the Orient Express Preshow Notes May 2 2025

**Pre notes 10 mins 30 secs**

**SYNOPSIS/ BRIEF OVER-VIEW.** The title “MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS” is a spoiler in itself – In 1934 The world famous Belgian Detective Inspector Poirot and an eclectic international mix of wealthy First Class travellers board The elegant Orient Express to travel from Istanbul in Turkey to Europe. A murder is committed on the train, and Poirot's trip home is interrupted to solve the case.

**THE SET**

Here we are in the 675 seater ASB Waterfront Theatre. All the seats arc round in a semi-circle including the 200 seats up on the second level. We’re roughly facing north and the stage for this production is a 12 metre wide & 8 metres high rectangle set into the wall in front of us about 1 metre up off the ground from the front row of seats. ^ The cueing and pace of the show is quick so a lot of the description is in the Set & scene transitions.

There are 6 different Scene Settings in the whole show.

1. The Restaurant at Istanbul’s Tokatlien Hotel in Turkey which only features near the start.

2. A Train Station’s Platform. ^ The illusion of a long platform is entirely created on the black stage floor by a metre wide pathway of light. This channel of light is 2 metres back from the front edge of the stage and running side to side across the whole width. Behind this “platform” for the most part is the long external side of 1 of the train’s big life size passenger carriages which – like the platform in front of it also stretches across the entire stage from side to side. Disappearing off on each side the beginning of an adjoining carriage is dimly lit and sometimes they clank and jostle as the train chugs to life. Once the train is moving the platform disappears and the train itself is the set. At times as the train trundles along passengers can be detected through the windows as they move through the carriages.

^ The side of the train’s carriages can be raised up and away providing unimpeded access to the scenes inside. So with the train as the set we have 4 other on board settings.

- The red carpeted, brown polished wooden walls of the passageway or corridor that runs from side to side along in front of the skinny doors to the 1st Class Compartments is one setting.

- Then this entire internal wall of the compartments can be raised up and away providing a view directly into each separate compartment- and even out their windows on the far side to the film projections of the snowy landscape passing by. (more on the projections soon)

- Another setting is the Onboard restaurant carriage in opulent Art Deco styling and the cosy red glow from it’s plush lamp shades.

- And finally there’s the train’s onboard confined 2 metre wide Observation Deck. “Deck” is a generous word for it as it’s crammed between 2 carriages with a hip-high metal railing across the front and less than a metre of depth back to the brown varnished wooden walls and door. The observation deck is used once.

Up above the train is mostly used like a film screen with images projected onto it. As the train races along heading left the images of falling white snow on the black night sky are

projected above it. As the Express moves the snow outside and above blows from left to right enhancing the feeling of movement. All references to snow are referring to these projected images of snow – there’s no actual physical snow substitute falling onto the stage. The Set is designed by the excellent John Verryt.

Because everyone is on the train that we are looking at from side-on, they are either coming or going from the left or right. Sometimes there’s no time to describe which side- but often their footsteps are generally loud enough to let us know.

Just a brief tangent to summarize a moment in the Play where Inspector Poirot is trying to illuminate what- if anything is written on a piece of partially burned paper. Poirot takes the dome like Mesh wiring from a Hat Box and places it over the wick of a Spirit Lamp, he lays the fragile paper on the mesh and holds it in place with more mesh over the top. When he lights the flame- for a brief moment before the paper burns completely, the flame illuminates anything that has been written on that paper. When he does this during the show, the paper and words Poirot is looking at are projected above the train and across the whole sky.

**WARDROBE/ COSTUMES**

The general palette of the set and costumes is ranges through the spectrum from dark grey, to navy blue, to brown, to crimson and gold.

Every character is either a first class traveler or associated to serving them. So everyone is dressed immaculately with a sense of wealth and even royalty. Like their commitment to the genre the character and their clothing is 1934 archetypal – the period of Bonnie n Clyde & Dick Tracy.

**Detective Inspector Poirot** is mostly in his creamy greyish suit, white shirt, black shoes and black bowtie. He has dark hair and a long moustache curled upwards on both sides. Outside the train he often has a long grey Trench-coat, a black Bowler Hat, Black leather gloves and a thin walking cane. In his compartment at night he is seen in pyjamas under a long crimson Dressing-gown with black cuffs.

**Monsieur Bouc** is The Director of the Wagon Lit Train Company that oversees The Orient Express. He has a thinner moustache and is predominantly in a faultless Blue suit, a light blue & white striped shirt and black tie with a criss-crossing of gold lines that create black diamonds down it’s length.

**Helen Hubbard** The loud, shrill American woman initially has her head framed in deafening red. From a distance it looks like a bright red headscarf that falls down and wraps round her neck. The scarf is re-emphasized by a large Beret in the same shrieking red billowing across her head. The red is matched again in her lipstick. The rest of her tailored womens suit with a robe like jacket falling from her shoulders drops in a subtle tiled tapestry of black and white. She changes to her version of pyjamas at night which involves a matte silk crimson hair wrap and matching robe over a long night gown. She has excellent comedic timing, gesture and especially facial expressions that often get laughs in the middle of dialogue – if there’s random laughter while people are speaking and we have no chance to Describe it to you- chances are she’ll be why.

**Princess Dragomiroff** The Russian is predominantly in brown, a long brown fur coat, a brown furry Russian Ushanka Hat with a long brown feather sticking out of a broach at

the front – the feather flutters as she stalks around in demanding staccato steps. She has a long hanging jewelled earring, a walking cane and often glares with pursed lips as she waves a cigarette around.

**Greta Ohlsonn** The Missionary is almost Dragomiroff’s shadow. She wears thin rimmed glasses, her hair is plaited up and over her head which creates it’s own woven band. She crosses herself every time she mentions God – which is a lot- and it often gets a laugh. Her buttoned up high collared long-sleeve top is plain light brown. The scarf over her shoulders is a darker brown and her dress is brown with an inter-crossing tartan pattern. Despite her diminutive stature she’s deceivingly strong. When we first meet her she’s carrying 4 suitcases for Princess Dragomiroff and when Michel The Conductor takes 1 from her it crashes to the ground it’s so heavy – this can get a laugh too.

**Countess Andrenyi** initially sweeps in with a light blue Fascinator cap accentuating her blue eyes, her face is framed by waves of falling blonde hair- her neck, chest and shoulders are swathed in a white fur throw and her shimmering long blue jacket with white fur cuffs and hems streams down around her- she has white leather gloves and a gold ring over the glove on her ring finger. Later during the journey she changes in to loose crimson pants and a Lilac long sleeved shirt.

**Mary Debenham** is a young woman with tidy dark hair framing her face. She’s a bundle of nerves desperately trying to cling on to composure. She’s in a light pink, silky, floral patterned suit jacket with a matching long sleeved, long collared top and a loose cravat in the same silky pink. She has a long dark crimson dress. When she’s outside she wears a light brown, tailored, long suit styled jacket.

**Colonel James Arbuthnot** is a grey haired Scotsman- ex Military in a brown suit, a mustard waistcoat, white shirt and brown Cravat.

**Samuel Ratchett** “imports n exports” is clean cut, shadowed in a wide brimmed hat, a grey suit, with a long grey Fur coat hanging off both shoulders. In his compartment at night he’s in pyjamas.

**Hector Macqueen Ratchetts Secretary** reminds me of Clark Kent/ Superman or Brad from The Rocky Horror Picture show – He is very clean cut with a definite part to one side of his carefully combed hair, brown rimmed glasses, brown pants, a light brown suit jacket with a subtle criss-crossing tartan pattern in browns and dark grey - echoed in the patterns of his tie which is tucked against his white shirt into a sleeveless knitted V collared brown vest.

**The Waiter** near the start is in a classic black tailed suit with white shirt and bow tie.

**Michel the Train Conductor** is in a classic flat topped-peaked navy blue train conductors hat, trousers, and gold buttoned up jacket with gold trims on his hat, up the centre seam of his jacket and the edge of both his buttoned down chest pockets.

**Audio Visual**
A rectangular projection screen runs the width of the stage above the top of the train set. Video projection is used throughout and includes show titles, billowing steam, train station, snow flurries, large stylised snowflakes and close ups of detailed information that provide clues in solving the mystery.

**Stage Effects**
Dry Ice & Haze is used during the show to depict the steam engine of the train. When a train sound is heard it is accompanied by a plume of smoke entering from both the right and left of the stage.

**Lighting**
Throughout the show, lighting effects are used in specific moments to highlight an important piece of information. In these moments, a narrow, sharp angled spotlight highlights an individual holding an item/clue with the rest of the stage in darkness for a brief moment before it returns to a normal lighting state. These spotlight moments are accompanied by a sting of string music to highlight the importance of the information.

In the Act 2 during flashbacks, the stage is lit in a blue hue with only Hercule Poirot lit in a warm spotlight. Various coloured spot lights come up on the other characters when they speak in flash back. This is of particular note for when Poirot is piecing the clues together and presenting the denoument.

**Sound**
All the music is prerecorded. All train sound effects are prerecorded. All gunshot sounds are prerecorded and occur offstage.

The actors are mic’d for the performance and this is important to note for Act 2 where flash backs and memories occur. During these flash back moments, the actors repeat dialogue from scenes in Act 1 and a distant reverb sound effect is applied to their voices to give the impression of a flash back.