

Pickwick & Frolic murder-mystery, 'Psych Ward Wacker,' is a tasty, dinner-theater treat

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By **Laura DeMarco, The Plain Dealer**

Who killed Nurse Virginia?

Does Billy Joel music cure psychosis?

And why is the waiter taking drink orders wearing scrubs?

The answer to that last question is relatively clear. I'm at the latest murder-mystery dinner theater show at Pickwick & Frolic Cabaret theater. The setting is a psych ward -- yes, not the most PC term, but nothing is sacred in this ribald, campy romp -- and the waiters are doubling as orderlies.

As to who killed Nurse Virginia? Well, you're going to have to figure out that one yourself -- over dessert with the help of your tablemates. "Psych Ward Whacker" is an interactive murder mystery, part of a popular mini-trend that invites "CSI" and "Law & Order" devotees to attempt to solve a "crime" for prizes while enjoying dinner and a show.

"These shows are phenomenally popular," says writer-director Michael Rogaliner. This is the fourth murder-mystery show he's done for the Frolic Cabaret. Other area venues that put on murder-mystery events include the Oberlin Inn, 100th Bomb Group Restaurant and your house (you can hire companies to do so).

"These murder-mysteries give people the chance to interact. I tell people 'I don't put on shows, I put on parties.' "



Joshua Gunter, The Plain Dealer

Doctor, doctor! Naughty Nurse Lisa (Sara Rouse) takes center stage in a scene from the interactive dinner-theater show "Psych Ward Whacker." Also pictured, from left: J.T. Buck as Dr. Carl, Kathleen Dunbar Cook as Brinkley and Matthew DeBattiste as Ellery Dickery.

Preview

Psych Ward Whacker

When: 7:15 p.m. Friday and Saturdays through August, and select Fridays and Saturdays in September.

Where: Frolic Cabaret theater at Pickwick & Frolic Restaurant and Club, 2035 East Fourth St., Cleveland.

Tickets: \$45.95 for dinner and show (choice of five entrees made at time of reservation). Call 216-241-7425 or **pickwickandfrolic.com**. Discounted \$2.50 parking available with ticket purchase.

Guests at Rogaliner's party last Saturday included Kelly Diamond, a mystery-show devotee from Brook Park.

"I love that it's so interactive and funny and you get the chance to catch the killer," she said.

Since the killer's identity doesn't change throughout the run, I won't spoil that here. I will say the suspect list is certainly colorful and includes Billy Joel.

Joel's music, you see, provides the soundtrack to the raunchy plot, set in a psychiatric ward that the audience is supposed to be visiting.

The cast includes the imposing Dr. Carl (J.T. Buck), who has developed a "revolutionary" Billy Joel music therapy; naughty Nurse Lisa (Sara Rouse), clad in a rubber dress; and three hospital residents. Pretend "Entertainment Tonight" broadcasts and several over-the-top dance numbers ("*You may be right, I may be crazy,*" . . . you get it) also take center stage. The evening is filled with double entendres, jokes about Billy Joel's initials and other risqué subject matter.

"It's adult humor," admits Rogaliner. "But I want to be subtle enough it could go either way, you can get it on two levels. . . . And when you have a terrifying environment like a hospital, you don't want to make it too dark. Then people won't want to eat or drink. Ultimately, people want to laugh and have fun."

People like Rick Biro, an IT professional from North Ridgeville who really got into the show. He dressed up in a doctor's lab coat to sit in the audience as well as partake in preshow karaoke.

"I wish more people would have gotten a little more into it and dressed up," he said.

But it's not all about laughs at Dr. Carl's hospital. People really do want to try out their forensic skills. Discussion was heated around the room during verdict/dessert time when each table selected a foreman to help formulate their answer.

My table's foreman, Presley Calogeras of Brook Park, guessed the right killer -- but was persuaded by others to write a different name.

"I knew it! I had it!" he exclaimed when the culprit was revealed.

But even though he didn't win, Calogeras didn't mind.

"I had a great time," he said.

He wasn't alone. "Psych Ward Whacker" may not be great theater, and for hard-core crime shows buffs it might not even add up. But it is great fun.