

Jewel Theatre Audience Guide



directed by Nancy Carlin

by Susan Myer Silton, Dramaturg
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“A false-hearted lover is worse than a thief.

For a thief will just rob you and take what you have,
But a false-hearted lover will lead you to the grave.

And the grave will decay you and turn you to dust;
Not one boy in a hundred a poor girl can trust.”

– Ira Levin, *A Kiss Before Dying*

ABOUT THE PLAY

CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

SIDNEY BRUHL (Rolf Saxon) “an impressive and well-tended man” of fifty and famous playwright of thrillers, known for his wildly successful hit, *The Murder Game*, and currently in a slump after a succession of Broadway bombs. His erudite sarcasm and pomposity are a cover for a deep desire for love, admiration, and acclaim.

MYRA BRUHL (Julie James) a “slim and self-effacing” woman in her forties, possessed of personal wealth and a weak heart, who has been “keeping a few secrets” of her own. She is the spouse “whose feet are on the ground, and whose eye is on the checkbook.” She maintains the couple’s life “in apple pie order.” Since her husband’s professional decline, she has been supporting their lavish lifestyle with her own finances.

CLIFFORD ANDERSON (Shaun Carroll) “an attractive young man free of obvious defects”, who took Sidney’s playwrighting seminar the previous summer and has mailed his nascent effort, *Deathtrap*, to Sidney for his approval.

HELGA TEN DORP (Diahanna Davidson) “a stocky strong-jawed Teutonic woman in her early fifties” and renown psychic who has moved into a cottage near the Bruhl’s home for six months to write a book with local author Paul Wyman and find respite from her strenuous work in Europe assisting law enforcement in finding murderers.

PORTER MILGRIM (Kurt Meeker) “a man of substance in his mid-fifties” and the Bruhl’s “dull old” attorney.

SETTING

As described by the playwright, “Sidney Bruhl’s study in a handsomely converted stable grafted onto an authentic Colonial house” in the tony town of Westport, Connecticut.

TIME

“A sunny day in mid-October” in the mid-seventies to early 1978, when *Deathtrap* was first presented.

“Someday, he thought, I would like to meet a monster who looked like a monster.”

– Ira Levin, *The Boys from Brazil*

SYNOPSIS

Warning. *The following synopsis contains spoilers. Especially with *Deathtrap*, which is carefully crafted not to reveal the twists and turns of the plot until the moment they occur, we recommend that you skip reading it before you’ve seen the play.*

As the play opens, Sidney Bruhl is telling his wife, Myra, about a play, *Deathtrap*, which he describes as “A thriller in two acts. One set, five characters. A juicy murder in Act One, unexpected developments in Act Two. Sound construction, good dialogue, laughs in the right places. Highly commercial.” When Myra congratulates him on his first idea in some time, he explains that it’s not his, but instead, he received the completed play that morning in the mail from Clifford Anderson, one of the students from his seminar the past summer on playwriting. Clifford has solicited Sidney’s critique, not knowing that his admired advisor has been in a writer’s slump, fruitlessly wracking his brain for ideas for plays. Sidney hasn’t had a successful play since his smash hit, *The Murder Game*, 18 years ago. Since then, he has had four flops in succession. Myra’s money has been financing the couple’s extravagant lifestyle, and Sidney has become desperate for another success.

Out of his desperation has emerged a plan, which he reveals to Myra. He wants to invite the young would-be playwright to the house, kill him, and claim *Deathtrap* as his own. Something in his tone leads Myra to fear that he is deadly serious. Feigning lightheartedness, she warns Sidney against staining the carpet with blood and reminds him that “the next day Helga ten Dorp would be picking up the psychic vibrations.” Helga, a Dutch psychic who has solved murders all over Europe, is expected to move into a neighboring cottage for the next six months to collaborate on a book with a local author and take some well-deserved rest.

Despite Myra’s objections, Sidney telephones Clifford and offers to help him with his manuscript. Sidney’s sly probing, disguised as congenial chatter, prompts Clifford to disclose that he is single and lives alone, no one else knows about his play or has read it, and there is only one other copy, which he agrees to bring with him when he comes to the Bruhl’s home.

At the top of Scene 2, Sidney is showing a starstruck Clifford around his study while Myra skittishly shadows them. With casual precision, Sidney extracts even more information from the hapless Clifford to set the stage for the perfect murder. Myra tries to derail the plot by proposing a collaboration between elder and emerging playwright, where the former would finesse the latter’s basic plot to ready it for production. The men would share both authorship and revenues.

Confident that his play, with perhaps only negligible editing, is stage worthy as is, Clifford turns Myra down. Sidney, unfazed and conciliatory, segues to talking about the plays he is developing. One is about his idol, Houdini, an early 20th-century American magician noted for his sensational escape acts. Sidney identifies a pair of trick handcuffs that once belonged to Houdini among the “guns, handcuffs, maces, broadswords, and battle-axes” hanging on the wall. He coaxes Clifford to try them on, assuring him that they are designed to easily slip out of. Clifford is uncomfortable but agrees, soon finding himself manacled and unable to escape. Pretending to be getting the key to release him, Sidney walks behind Clifford, snatches a garrotte off the wall, and strangles him with it.

Deeply shaken, Myra nevertheless helps her husband carry Clifford’s lifeless body to the vegetable garden where Sidney will bury it. The scene closes as the couple strain through the French doors leading outside with their unwieldy load.

Scene 3 opens with Sidney entering the study later that evening from the vegetable garden, wiping dirt from his hands and clothing before he pulls the drapes across the French doors. He is chilled and exhausted from digging Clifford’s grave. Myra pours Sidney a brandy, refreshes hers, and declares that their 11-year marriage is finished. She tells him he must move out, rebuffing his attempts to assuage and dissuade her. As they argue, the doorbell rings. Their new neighbor, the psychic Helga ten Dorp, arrives “in the throes of considerable distress,” apologizing for her intrusion at the late hour and explaining that she has an urgent message for them that could not wait. She pokes about the room, declaring that it is full of “Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain” and it is a “deathtrap.” She warns Sidney of a “Man ... in boots ... Young man ... Here in this room – he attacks you.” (Clifford was wearing boots when he entered the home.) Each vision Helga tosses out eerily resembles the events of the day, adding to Myra’s already heightened distress. In a comic turn as she departs, Helga urges them to be sure to watch her upcoming appearance on *The Merv Griffin Show*.

Unlike Myra, Sidney lends no credence to Helga’s ramblings and instead attempts to cajole his spouse into accepting what he has done, even going so far as to suggest the possibility “that murder is an aphrodisiac.” As he reaches through the drapes hanging over the French doors to check the deadbolt, a bloodied hand covered in dirt grabs him. Clifford, undead and swinging a stick of firewood at Sidney’s head, wrenches Sidney’s hand behind his back, forcing him over to the desk, where he pushes him down. He beats Sidney viciously about the head until he is dead, and then turns to Myra. She begs him to spare her life, staggers back from him, clutches her heart, and collapses to the floor. Uncertain if she is still alive, Clifford raises the firewood, checking her pulse with his free hand, then declares, “She’s dead. I’m positive”. Sidney gets up from the desk and joins Clifford. They look down at Myra. “It worked”, he says.

We realize that all that Sidney and Clifford have said and done to this point has been a ploy, devised to literally frighten Myra to death by heart attack. The play, *Deathtrap*, never existed, no young playwright was killed so Sidney could claim it as his own, the murders were carefully rehearsed in a nearby motel, and the firewood Clifford used

to club Sidney to death was made of Styrofoam. Act I ends with Sidney telephoning the doctor and declining an ambulance – “there’s no use in that” – as Clifford moves his things into the upstairs bedroom.

Act II, Scene 1 begins two weeks later with Sidney and Clifford sitting across from one another in the study at an antique “partners’ desk”. Sidney, still cramped by writers’ block, is growing increasingly vexed by Clifford’s energetic, non-stop typing of his play, which he has based on his experience as a welfare worker. Porter Milgrim, Sidney’s lawyer, arrives to discuss Myra’s estate with Sidney, who introduces Clifford as his secretary. Clifford goes off to grocery shop, locking his manuscript in his desk drawer before he departs. This arouses Porter’s “suspicious legal mind”, but Sidney tells him not to worry. However, after Porter leaves, Sidney breaks into Clifford’s drawer, finds the manuscript, which is entitled *Deathtrap*, and quickly scans it, discovering it is based on the plot to cause Myra’s death, its dramatis personae scarcely disguised. Shortly after Clifford arrives with the groceries, Sidney tricks him into swapping their manuscripts, which leads to Sidney’s revelation of what he has learned. He challenges Clifford, who pushes back, undaunted by Sidney’s protests. He defends his work, and proposes exactly what Myra had in Act I, that he write the basic plot and Sidney finesse it. Sidney is not convinced. It isn’t until Clifford finally threatens to move out and keep writing the play that Sidney relents and agrees to collaborate.

As the lights come up on Scene 2, it’s clear that a substantial length of time has passed, given the towering pile of manuscript pages stacked on the desk. It’s late evening, and through the rainstorm that has ominously begun, we see the approaching light from Helga ten Dorp’s flashlight as she arrives through the wind-rattled French doors. When Clifford leaves to find the candles she has come to borrow, Helga warns Sidney that his secretary is going to attack him. Sidney assures her that he intends to fire Clifford – not only because of Helga’s portents, but Porter has unearthed some sordid details about Clifford’s criminal past.

Clifford gives the candles to Helga, who exits, leaving him and Sidney to work on *Deathtrap’s* second act. Sidney tells Clifford he has “Act Two ready to go” but there are “two bits of business” – physical confrontations between two of the characters – that he’s not sure will work. “We’ll try them,” he says, “and if they do, I’ll give you the whole thing scene by scene. It’s full of surprises”. When Clifford returns from closing the upstairs windows against the ferociously swelling storm, Sidney describes the action they will play out. As Julian, he will shoot Clifford, the Inspector Hubbard character. However, the gun has only one bullet, so he must get to the weapons wall and grab whatever is closest to complete the job.

The men rehearse the scene with gruesome intent, thrashing about so violently that the floor and walls become slippery with their blood and weapons skid across the floor. In the midst of the mêlée, Sidney proclaims, “*Deathtrap* is over. We’re now into theater vérité”. Workshopping the scene has provided a platform for Sidney’s carefully choreographed, precise plan that will leave no doubt that he killed Clifford in self-defense. “I really don’t want that play to be written,” he explains as he points a gun

at Clifford. He fires, but there are no bullets. Clifford anticipated this move, loaded Sidney's gun with blanks, and loaded his own pistol, which he pulls from the wall and aims at Sidney. Instead of shooting him, however, he orders Sidney to handcuff himself to his chair, telling him that he will be leaving to finish writing the play and thanking him for providing the perfect closing scene: "The whole thing we just did; it'll play like a dream, and I never would have thought of it! I'm really in your debt."

As Clifford heads upstairs to pack, Sidney easily slips out of the handcuffs, which are the Houdini trick ones. He snatches a crossbow from the wall of weapons and aims up the staircase, shooting an arrow into Clifford's chest. Clifford tumbles lifelessly down the stairs.

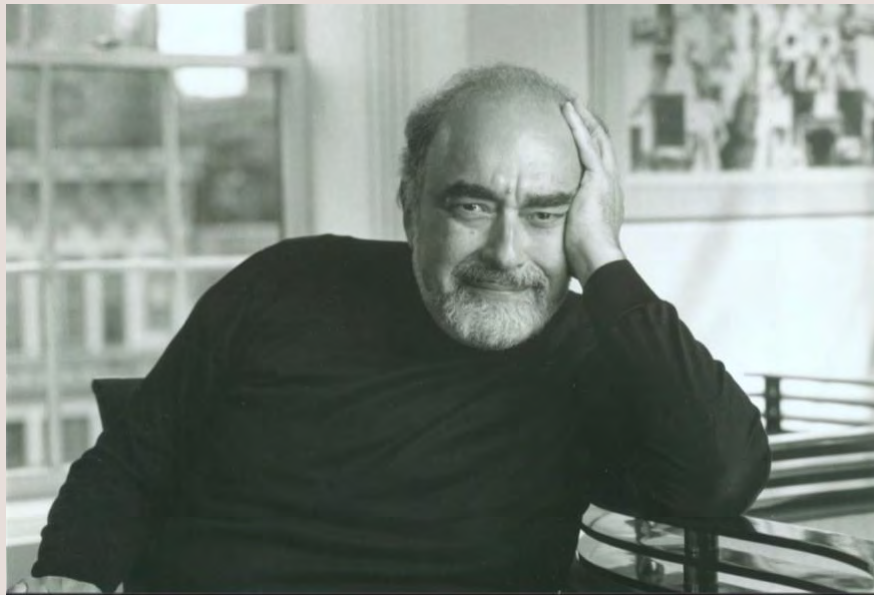
Sidney doublechecks that Clifford is indeed dead, then grabs the stack of papers and burns its entirety in the fireplace. Certain it has turned to ash, he drags Clifford's body into the study to set up the scene that he will soon describe to the police. He calls them to report that he has killed his secretary, who was "coming at [him] with an ax", and as he adds more details, a hand raises from the dark and grabs his throat. With his last ounce of life, Clifford, who has pulled the arrow from his chest, stabs Sidney with it until both lie dead.

In the final scene of the play, we find Helga and Porter in Sidney's study, where the grisly remnants of the previous scene have been cleared away. Helga receives a vision of the events and describes them to a horrified Porter. As they converse, both realize that they could develop the story into a smash hit, a thriller called *Deathtrap*. Each claims rights to the potential profits, starting a nasty argument. If Porter doesn't agree to her share, Helga threatens to inform the authorities of his horrible little hobby of making obscene phone calls. As Porter advances menacingly on Helga, she grabs a dagger from the weapons wall and brandishes it at him which he screams obscenities at her. The lights go down as they circle the desk, stalking one another.

One great difference between good writing, that readers overlook, and bad writing, that they fail to notice, has to do with the number of rewrites and revisions usually required by the former. It isn't at all easy to write clear, declarative prose—transparency evolves from ruthless cutting and trimming and is hard work—while lumpy, tangle-footed writing flows from the pen as if inspired by the Muse.

— Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives*

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Ira Levin

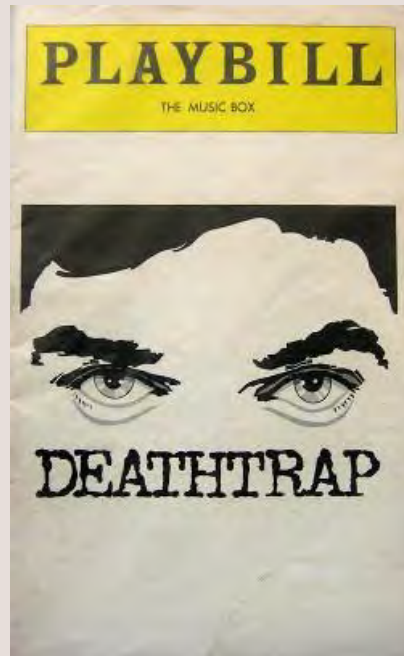
From Ira Levin's obituary by Margalit Fox in the *New York Times*, November 14, 2007:

Ira Marvin Levin was born in Manhattan on Aug. 27, 1929. Reared in the Bronx and Manhattan, he attended Drake University in Iowa for two years before transferring to New York University, from which he received a bachelor's degree in 1950. From 1953 to 1955, he served in the Army Signal Corps.

As a college senior, Mr. Levin had entered a television screenwriting contest sponsored by CBS. Though he was only a runner-up, he later sold his screenplay to NBC, where it became "Leda's Portrait," an episode in the network's anthology suspense series "Lights Out," in 1951.

While continuing to write for television, Mr. Levin published his first novel, "A Kiss Before Dying," when he was in still his early 20s. Widely praised by critics for its taut construction and shifting points of view, the novel tells the story of

Mr. Levin, who won a second Edgar in 1980 for “Deathtrap,” was named a grand master by the Mystery Writers of America in 2003.



Original Playbill for *Deathtrap*, 1979



Poster for *Deathtrap* film, 1982

Before returning to fiction with “Rosemary’s Baby,” Mr. Levin focused on writing for the stage. His comedy “No Time for Sergeants” (1955), which he adapted from the novel by Mac Hyman, was a hit on Broadway. (The play, and the 1958 film of the same title, starred a young actor named Andy Griffith.) Mr. Levin’s later Broadway outings, among them “Drat! The Cat!,” a musical that ran for eight performances in 1965, were less successful. (A song from the musical, “She Touched Me,” with lyrics by Mr. Levin and music by Milton Schafer, did go on to become a hit for Barbra Streisand as “He Touched Me.”) Then came “Deathtrap.” The tale of an aging dramatist who plots to kill a young rival and steal his new play, “Deathtrap,” ran on Broadway for 1,793 performances, from 1978 to 1982. It became a Hollywood film in 1982, starring Michael Caine and Christopher Reeve.

Mr. Levin’s two marriages, to Gabrielle Aronsohn and Phyllis Finkel, ended in divorce. He is survived by three sons from his marriage to Ms. Aronsohn: Adam Levin-Delson of Bothell, Wash.; Jared Levin and Nicholas Levin, both of Manhattan; a sister, Eleanor Busman of Mount Kisco, N.Y.; and three grandchildren.

If Mr. Levin never achieved renown as a literary novelist, that, judging from many interviews over the years, was perfectly fine with him. It tickled him that the phrase “Stepford wife,” and even “Stepford” as an adjective (denoting anything robotic or acquiescent), had entered the English lexicon.

Mr. Levin was less pleased, however, at the tide of popular Satanism his work appeared to unleash.

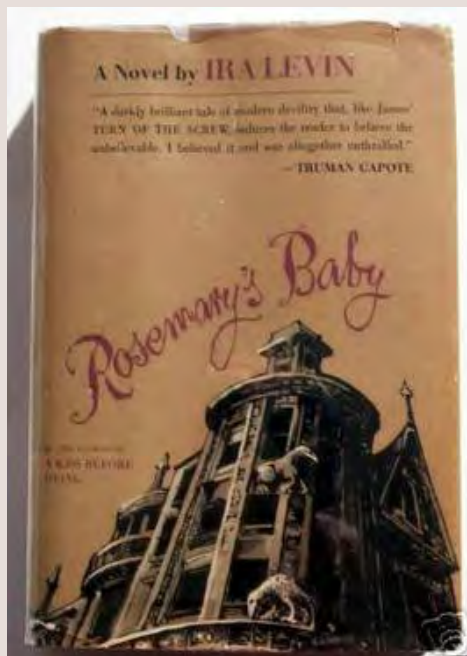
“I feel guilty that ‘Rosemary’s Baby’ led to ‘The Exorcist,’ ‘The Omen,’” he told *The Los Angeles Times* in 2002. “A whole generation has been exposed, has more belief in Satan. I don’t believe in Satan. And I feel that the strong fundamentalism we have would not be as strong if there hadn’t been so many of these books.”

“Of course,” Mr. Levin added, “I didn’t send back any of the royalty checks.”

Margalit Fox describes Levin’s body of work in her *New York Times* article:

Mr. Levin’s output was modest – just seven novels in four decades – but his work was firmly ensconced in the popular imagination. Together, his novels sold tens of millions of copies, his literary agent, Phyllis Westberg, said yesterday [November 13, 2007]. Nearly all of his books were made into Hollywood movies, some more than once. Mr. Levin also wrote the long-running Broadway play “Deathtrap,” a comic thriller.

Combining elements of several genres – mystery, Gothic horror, science fiction and the techno-thriller – Mr. Levin’s novels conjured up a world full of quietly looming menace, in which anything could happen to anyone at any time. In short, the Ira Levin universe was a great deal like the real one, only more so: more starkly terrifying, more exquisitely mundane.



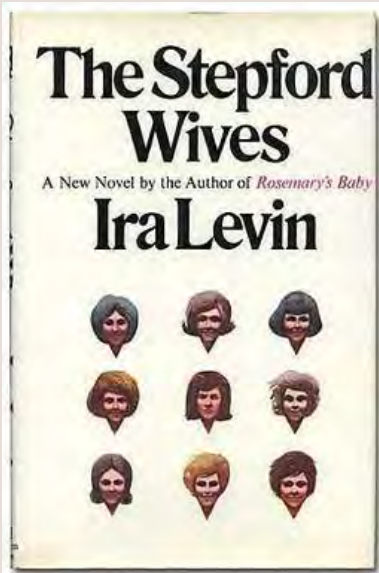
Rosemary's Baby, first edition, 1967



Rosemary's Baby movie poster, 1968

In “*Rosemary’s Baby*” (Random House, 1967), a young New York bride may

have been impregnated by the Devil. In “The Stepford Wives” (Random House, 1972), the women in an idyllic suburb appear to have been replaced by complacent, preternaturally well-endowed androids. In “The Boys from Brazil” (Random House, 1976), Josef Mengele, alive and well in South America, plots to clone a new Hitler from the old.



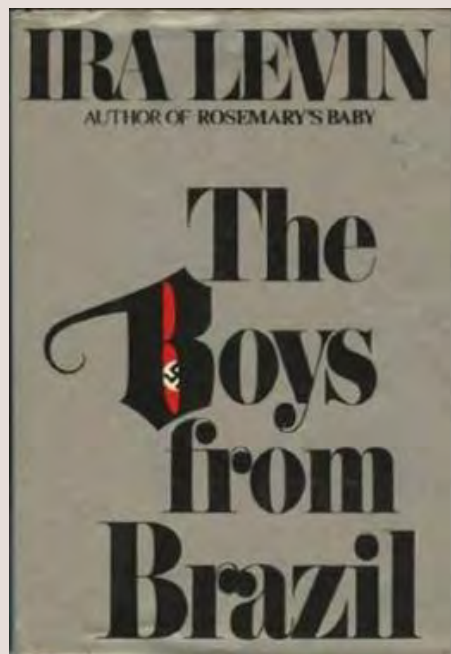
First edition, 1972



Movie poster, 1975



Movie poster, 2004



The Boys from Brazil, first edition, 1976



The Boys from Brazil movie poster, 1978

Few critics singled out Mr. Levin as a stylist. But most praised him as a master of the ingredients essential to the construction of a readable thriller: pace, plotting and suspense. Reviewing “Rosemary’s Baby” in The New York Times Book Review, Thomas J. Fleming wrote:

“Mr. Levin’s suspense is beautifully intertwined with everyday incidents; the delicate line between belief and disbelief is faultlessly drawn.” Mr. Fleming was less impressed, however, with the novel’s denouement:

“Here, unfortunately, he pulls a switcheroo which sends us tumbling from sophistication to Dracula,” the review continued. “Our thoroughly modern suspense story ends as just another Gothic tale.”

Mr. Levin’s other novels are “A Kiss Before Dying” (Simon & Schuster, 1953); “This Perfect Day” (Random House, 1970); “Sliver” (Bantam, 1991); and “Son of Rosemary” (Dutton, 1997), a sequel in which Mama’s little boy is all grown up.

The film versions of his books include “Rosemary’s Baby” (1968), starring Mia Farrow and John Cassavetes; “The Stepford Wives” (1975), starring Katharine Ross and Paula Prentiss; and “The Boys from Brazil” (1978), starring Gregory Peck, Laurence Olivier and James Mason.

There was also a spate of made-for-TV sequels: “Look What’s Happened to Rosemary’s Baby” (1976), “Revenge of the Stepford Wives” (1980) and “The Stepford Children” (1987). A big-screen remake of “The Stepford Wives,” starring Nicole Kidman and Matthew Broderick, was released in 2004.

Ira Levin died on November 12, 2007, at his home in Manhattan. He was 78.

His son Nicholas has kept his legacy alive by curating a [website](#) devoted to his father, where you can find information that includes his notebooks, writings on his process, background information, articles, interviews, podcasts, archives, and new media adaptations of his work.

RESOURCES

A Study Guide for Ira Levin's Deathtrap. Kristin B. Mallegg (ed.), Gale, Cengage Learning. The Gale Group, Inc., Farmington Hills, MI, Kindle Edition, 2017.

[“A Totally Normal Interview: Andrew Blogs on ‘Deathtrap’”](#). Andrew Beck interviewed by Timothy Swellington, Bag&Baggage Productions, September 2018.

[“Breaking Through the Color Barrier: Lawrence Blogs on ‘Deathtrap’”](#). Lawrence Siulagi, Bag&Baggage Productions, September 2018.

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[“Deathtrap. By Ira Levin: An Audience Guide”](#). by Martin Andrucki for the Public Theatre, New York, New York. *Thinking Theater/Writing Theater: Essays on Drama and Works for the Stage*, October 2005.

[“Elegance and Manipulation: Eric Blogs on ‘Deathtrap’”](#), Eric St. Cyr, Bag&Baggage Productions, September 2018.

[“Into the ‘Deathtrap’ and back out with the new”](#). Brett Campbell, *Theatre, Oregon ArtsWatch: Art and Culture News*, October 25, 2018

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[“Keep ‘Em Guessing!: Mandy Blogs on ‘Deathtrap’”](#). Mandana Khoshnevisan, Bag&Baggage Productions, September 2018.

[“More Than Meets the Eye ... : Morgan Blogs on ‘Deathtrap’”](#). Morgan Cox, Bag&Baggage Productions, September 2018.