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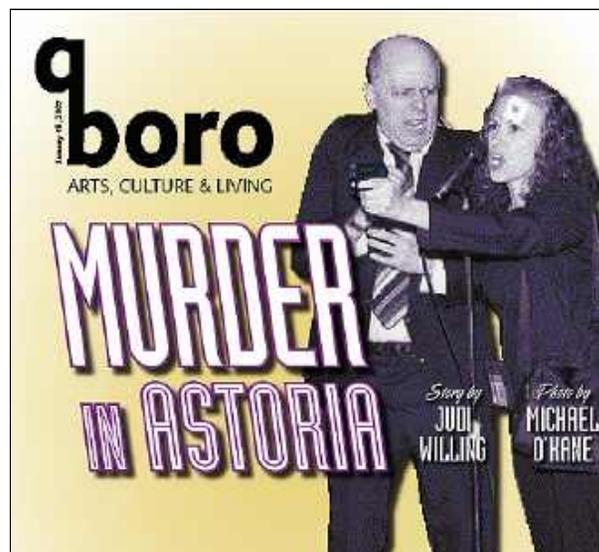
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Murder In Astoria

by Judi Willing, arts@qchron.com

01/18/2007

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The event is a murder mystery dinner show by the Killing Kompany. I arrive at Riccardo's, the well known Astoria restaurant near the Triborough Bridge.

The place is lit up like a Christmas tree. I find my seat at table 15. I am seated opposite Camilla Mariano and Mary Ann Stahl, who I have never met before. I find out that they live in the neighborhood; they are good friends, best buddies who like to go out together, particularly to the theater.

A crowd of about 180 is already in full party mode wanting a good time. Most have already eaten their fruit cocktails. There is a line for additional appetizers and drinks. The appetizers are meals in themselves; the ribs and fried chicken are good, but the cheese cubes and cold ham slices go untouched.

As we eat our appetizers and get acquainted, Lt. Dorsey from the NYPD visits our table, asking if everything is OK. He is in uniform, walks and talks like a New York cop, but

something is not right. He wears brown hiking boots, ordinary black pants without a side seam, and a badge number 3100. He eats meatballs in tomato sauce, not donuts.

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Our next visitors are Jim and Artie Mitchell, who claim to be brothers. They do not look alike, and have wildly different ties. They look sleazy, and claim to have made a 1972 skin flick called "Behind the Green Door." They do not appear to like each other.

Our third visitor is a reporter from the National Inquirer. I assume that she is being professionally polite by coming over. Her name is Marilyn Spanier and she mentions that she writes romance novels. She gives me bookmarks from two of her published books, "Forever" and "Strangers in the Night." She looks just like a reporter, slightly harassed, with eyes everywhere. After she has gone I think, National Inquirer? I do not recall a paper with this name—maybe it's a paper in Brooklyn.

The next visitor takes our orders for dinner—chicken, beef or salmon? Dorsey blows his whistle. I notice that the doors to the foyer are shut.

Using the microphone, and not attempting to get silence, Dorsey welcomes us to the event, and sets out a few ground rules: Do not molest people if you see them with a gun. If you see a gun, cover you ears; gunshot is loud.

In the midst of all this, a man enters through a side door wearing a torn white shirt covered in red paint, and collapses. With a minimum of fuss, he is draped over a trolley and wheeled out by the Mitchell brothers.

Dorsey picks various members of the audience to come up to the microphone; his repartee with them is what makes the evening so popular. Dorsey acts as though he is just doing his job as an NYPD officer, unaware that he is being funny. He does not linger on a joke, or take it to a deeper level. He moves right along like a cop issuing a traffic summons, eager to get on and out.

One man gives his job as "a professional alcoholic." Dorsey replies, quick as lightning, "give the man some water; he's been passing it all evening."

One woman says she is a banker. Dorsey inquires of her boyfriend, "so you get penalties for early withdrawal?" To one kid in the 12th grade, Dorsey confides: "It's my favorite grade—did it for five years."

The audience loves it all. Dorsey is convincing as a police officer, and "very good," according to Stahl.

Somewhere among the banter, clues are being established. Most people come to "enjoy the humor and the jokes—they want to be part of the show. Everyone ignores the evidence," explains Jon Avner, writer of the show.

There is a second murder. It occurs during Jim Mitchell's karaoke rendition of "New York, New York." The audience hardly notices the body; they are singing along wildly and swaying in their seats.

Mariano and Stahl are in raptures, clapping throughout. The unfortunate victim is the reporter from the National Inquirer. She has been shot in the head.

An update is needed. The case is bogged down. "Backup" is required. Someone sends for the "macho guys."

Darin Chumbley arrives wearing a police uniform, but he is a dancing cop—Chippendale style. Clearly well trained, he dances at the end the room, and then moves up the aisle, taking liberties with the ladies, and removing some of his clothes.

During all this, another man drops dead, this time from cyanide poisoning. Domonic Marcus plays the victim. The Mitchell brothers drag away his corpse. Marcus, a trained actor, does a terrific job playing dead.

A small but delicious ice cream sundae is served with coffee. Some folks get up and dance, others try to work out who committed the three murders.

No one at my table has any idea. I ask Mariano if she has been able to follow the story. "Not really," she replies, "It's too much to absorb, it's overwhelming. I couldn't really see or hear."

Dorsey returns to solve the crime. No one has come even close to guessing who did it. Someone thinks that Michael O'Kane, the Queens Chronicle photographer, did it.

The denouement points to a serial killer who kills people in the movie business, and another serial killer who

kills serial killers, vigilante style. The complex plot is based on a story from the TV show “Dexter.”

Dorsey reveals himself as no other than Avner. Avner writes the shows and can tailor them for companies and organizations. The next Killing Kompany show in April is titled “Murder at the IRS,” and will take place at Riccardo’s.

Anyone who wants to be a guest suspect, or would like to surprise someone else, should e mail Avner at killingkompany@killingkompany.com

I ask Mariano if she has enjoyed herself. She says she loved the show and would come again. “The humor of Dorsey kept it all very upbeat. He is a good master of ceremonies, and the meal is okay.”

For a sneak peek at crimes scheduled for Queens in the near future, visit www.killingkompany.com or call (888) SHOOTEM.

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