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Steel Beam's 'Murderer' not for the squeamish

By

"Murderer" starts with a long first scene that manages to be both surreal and shocking at the very same time.

An artist works at his easel while a woman flips through a magazine. He pours her a drink. Seconds later, she's out cold.

He precedes to strangle her, undress her under a blanket, pluck her teeth out with pliers and then carry her upstairs where the audience watches as he dismembers her corpse in a bathtub.

Wearing boxer shorts and a white apron over his bare chest, the man nonchalantly pads up and down the stairs. He needs a kitchen knife for this task, an electric saw for another. He bags bloody body parts and stuffs them into his fireplace — breaking only to enjoy a bite of his sandwich or plant a kiss on the decapitated head.

It's all done without dialogue, stretching out a good 15 minutes, maybe longer. And it's made all the more uncomfortable at Steel Beam Theatre, an intimate venue that seems way too cozy to be staging a bloodbath.

Of course, not all is as it seems in "Murderer," written by Anthony Shaffer, the man who penned the more well-known "Sleuth."

Sadly, "Murderer" is no "Sleuth." It does, however, keep you guessing with regard to some truly twisted characters.

The ax-wielding artist is Norman Bartholomew (Thomas Reed), a buffoonish man obsessed with murderers and determined, he says, to commit a crime that will make him "infamous for all time." So he entertains himself by re-enacting famous murders with his mistress Millie (Kathryn Meiners) and plotting to kill his wife Elizabeth (Sherry Winchester Schultz).

His suspicious movements — reported by a neighbor — draw the slow-witted Sgt. Stenning (Thom Thomas) to Bartholomew's home in the English countryside. "I like to pay homage to the great murderers of the past," Bartholomew explains when Stenning finds a fake body part. "Are you a nutter?" the cop blurts out, before warning Bartholomew that no good will come of murder games.

When — and if — the characters give up the game and embrace the real thing keeps audiences guessing throughout.

That said, "Murderer" remains a bit slow for a thriller, and Stenning's actions ring false throughout.

Still, the cast takes a tough play and makes it work. Reed, in particular, revels in Bartholomew's eccentricities, creating just enough doubt about his actual intent. And as his wife, Schultz provides a strong balance, cutting Bartholomew down with each well-delivered acid-tongued line.

If only the quips had flowed as freely as the blood in the bathtub, "Murderer" might have been a stronger play.