

STUDY GUIDE


NEW STAGE THEATRE PRESENTS

Agatha Christie



**MURDER ON THE
ORIENT EXPRESS**

ADAPTED BY KEN LUDWIG
DIRECTED BY PEPPY BIDDY

OCTOBER 22 - NOVEMBER 3, 2019



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Theatre

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Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express is presented by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc., a Concord Theatricals Company

NEW STAGE THEATRE EDUCATION
DREW STARK, EDUCATION ASSOCIATE

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

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****Please note:** We want to hear from you and your students! Please respond by filling out the enclosed evaluation forms. These forms help us to secure funding for future Education programming. Please send your comments and suggestions to: New Stage Education Department, 1100 Carlisle Street, Jackson, MS 39202, or email: education@newstagetheatre.com**

Thank you for your support!

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

THEATRE ETIQUETTE

To best prepare your students for today's performance, we ask that you review these guidelines for expected behavior of an audience BEFORE the show.

TEACHERS:

Speaking to your students about theatre etiquette is ESSENTIAL. This performance of *Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express* at New Stage Theatre may be some students' first theatre experience. Students should be aware that this is a live performance and should keep distractions to a minimum as a courtesy to those around them.

STUDENTS:

- Stay with your group at all times and pay attention to your teachers and chaperones.
- Listen to the New Stage staff member who will board your bus and escort your group to the lobby.
- Be sure to go to the bathroom before the performance begins. It is hard to leave without causing a disturbance to those around you once the performance starts.
- Please do not stand up, walk around or put your feet on the seat in front of you. Make yourself comfortable while keeping movement to a minimum.
- Recording devices and cameras are strictly prohibited.
- Absolutely no gum chewing, eating or drinking in the theatre.

Noise

Live theatre creates a unique and dynamic atmosphere between actors and audience members for sharing ideas and emotional expression. In the same way that actors can hear what is happening on-stage, they can also hear disruptions in the audience as well. While actors appreciate laughter and applause at appropriate times, excessive noise and talking is not welcomed. Even whispering voices can be distracting to the actors and others in the audience.

- Cell phones are prohibited inside the theatre. Not only is the use of cell phones during a performance distracting for both the actors and fellow audience members, the cellular signal interferes with the use of our sound system. Upon entering the theatre, please remind students (and teachers) to turn off all electronic devices and store them during the performance. If there is a disturbance, they will be asked to leave and will not be invited back to the theatre.

Applause

Applause respectfully acknowledges the performers and shows appreciation or audience approval. Traditionally, applause occurs before intermission and at the conclusion of a performance. Dimming the lights on the stage and bringing up the house lights generally signals these intervals. A curtain call, when the cast returns to the stage, will follow every performance. At the conclusion of the performance, we encourage you to like us on Facebook and other social media platforms. Enjoy the show!

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (BEFORE SEEING THE SHOW) AT NEW STAGE THEATRE:

Show Etiquette:

- What is the role of the audience in a live performance?
- How is it different from seeing a film? Why can't you talk? What can happen in live theatre that cannot happen in cinema?
- What are the differences between live theatre and cinema? (Two-dimensional vs. three dimensional; larger than life on the screen vs. life-size; recorded vs. live performances, etc.)
- Discuss the nature of film as mass produced, versus the singular, intimate nature of live performances. Compare original art work to poster design or print work. Which do they feel is more valuable? Why?

Pre-show Questions

- Consider the idea of the "perfect crime." What constitutes a perfect crime? What factors would need to be taken into consideration in order to plan a perfect crime? Is committing a crime ever justified?
- How do you explain the difference between facts and evidence? Are all facts evidence? Is all evidence a fact?
- Examine the importance of the setting of the novel. What makes a train the perfect setting for a murder? What role does the season of the year play in the events of the story? What role does the time period play?
- *Murder on the Orient Express* features one of Christie's famous characters, Detective Hercule Poirot, who is featured in thirty-seven of Christie's novels. By reusing a familiar character in her novels, how does Christie influence the reader's experience of the text? How well does this translate to visual mediums, such as TV/film and on the stage?
- Creating suspense in a story is a technique used by authors to captivate their readers. Cinematic and theatre directors create a mood in a variety of ways for their audiences. What are some of the ways that writers in different genres create suspense in their plots? How can these methods be intensified on film or articulated on the stage?

Theatre Observations (on the day of the show) at New Stage Theatre

FOR STUDENTS: Look around. What do you see? How does it make me feel? What in the play contributed to that feeling?

- Observe the lighting instruments around the room and on the ceiling. Look at the set. Does it look realistic or abstract? Try to guess how the set will be used during the show.
- Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance: The lights, set, props, costumes, and stage direction. Discuss all the people involved in the backstage choreography or "behind the scenes" elements of the show happening in front of an audience. Tell them to be aware of this as they watch the show. Observe how each technical element establishes mood or furthers the dramatic action of the story.
- What special effects are used in the show? Were the effects successful?
- What is your first impression of each of the characters visually? Does their outward appearance reflect how you interpret their character? Does their appearance give you an impression of setting or mood? Do the actors change costumes quickly?
- How does the use of music and sound effects create a mood for the audience? Does it further the explanation of the story?
- Cinematic elements and projected images are also included in this production. How well do you feel these elements are incorporated into the play? How does the use of projections influence the scenic design? The majority of the action takes place within the confines of a train-car. How is this accomplished scenically?

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Post-show Discussion Questions

- Was the murder of Ratchett an act of absolute justice or was it an act of private vengeance? Divide the students into two sides- whether it was appropriate to take the law into one's own hands. Have students work in teams to prepare written defenses of their assigned side, whether they agree with that side or not. Use examples and/or facts from current events.
- In spite of the fact that the passengers confess to the crime, Mons. Bouc and Poirot choose to withhold the truth about what happened on the Orient Express from the authorities. Compose a persuasive essay that explores the following questions: Do you think they did the right thing? Is there ever a time when a person should be allowed to get away with murder?
- Throughout the play, every character lies to Poirot, either to deliberately deceive or misdirect his investigation. Is there ever a good reason to tell a lie? Write an essay that defends your answer using real life examples.
- Compare and contrast Ken Ludwig's play *Murder on the Orient Express* to the original novel, or one of the film adaptations (Lumet's 1974 or the Branagh's 2017)? Explain the similarities and differences between the original plot and subsequent adaptations for stage and screen. Which do you like better and why?

Discussion Activities

- Agatha Christie based parts of her novel on the real life kidnapping case of Charles Lindbergh. Research the Lindbergh kidnapping case and prepare a multimedia presentation that highlights the similarities and differences between the Lindbergh case and the fictionalized Armstrong case. Plot the persons of interest and how they all connect in each of the cases. Present an argument defending the outcomes of the two cases.
- There are many examples in Christie's works that there are times when death is an appropriate penalty for a crime. Do you agree with this position? Write a persuasive essay that uses examples from the play or from real life to support why you feel the way you do.
- Visit a public place like a restaurant and spend time watching the people around you. Compose a narrative sketch of several of the people that you find the most compelling. Use vivid descriptive details and figurative language to describe their physical appearance and include significant details that you believe reveal aspects of their personalities.
- As a class, create a murder mystery of your own. Using the format of a role-playing mystery game, create a murder mystery for another class to play. Include one example of planted evidence and one red herring.
- Much of the information given in the play we hear about through testimony but never see visually on stage. Actors sometimes do unscripted "improv" work and embellish the circumstances for two characters to interact. Create "deleted scenes" from the play with these characters, either in the past or on the train. Justify the relationship between the two characters and what led them to their present circumstances.
- In the play, the Broadway actress Linda Arden masquerades as Mrs. Hubbard to perpetrate her revenge on Mr. Ratchett. She concocts an elaborate backstory before boarding the train and introduces herself to Poirot and the rest of the passengers on the train as a housewife from Minnesota. Create an alter ego or alias for yourself and write a monologue explaining how you ended up at your school. Perform the monologue introducing yourself to the class, fully-dressed as the character, with a packed bag of appropriate items for your trip.

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READ AND INTERPRET

An excerpt from Ken Ludwig's *Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express*. Read the following scene between Ratchett and Poirot. 1) What is the relationship between these two men? 2) What can we learn about these two characters? 3) How do we feel about them? 4) What textual evidence foreshadows their fate?

Ratchett: Mr. Poirot, slow up! Now I'd like to discuss that proposition I mentioned.

Poirot: Non, non, I'm afraid it is not a good time.

Ratchett: Oh sure it is. Sit down. I'll be quick, I promise.

Poirot: I am afraid-

Ratchett: Sit down.

Poirot: ..Eh bien. Proceed.

Ratchett: Now I want you to take on a job for me.

Poirot: I take on few new cases.

Ratchett: You'll take this one on, I guarantee it.

Poirot: And why is that?

Ratchett: Because I'm talkin' big money here. Mr. Poirot, I have an enemy.

Poirot: I would guess you have several enemies.

Ratchett: Now what is that supposed to mean?

Poirot: You are successful, n'est ce pas? Successful people have many enemies.

Ratchett: Right. That's it exactly! You see I've been getting some threatening letters lately and I want an extra pair of eyes to do some snoopin' around. And that's what you do, am I right? Snoopin'? Of course, I can take care of myself. (He flashes the gun under his coat) But I'll pay you five thousand dollars. How does that sound?

Poirot: Non.

Ratchett: All right, ten. For a few days' work.

Poirot: I am not for sale, monsieur. I have been very fortunate in my profession and I now take only such cases as interest me- and frankly, you do not interest me.

Ratchett: You want me to grovel, is that it?

Poirot: I want nothing, monsieur, except to leave. (Poirot exits.)

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IMPORTANT THEMES

Discuss the convention of Poirot speaking to the audience at the beginning and end of the play. In this monologue, he introduces himself, the murder, and the complexity of this case. How does this introduction establish the rest of the play and how each character is presented to the audience? How do the characters in the play's first impression of Poirot differ from the audience's?

A reviewer in the Guardian in 1934 stated that the Christie's murder would be "perfect had Poirot not overhear a conversation between Miss Debenham and Col. Arbothnot." Due to unforeseen circumstances, how does the plot to commit the murder start to unravel for the perpetrators? How have each of the characters tried to manipulate Poirot? Consider from the killer's perspective which actions were deliberate or improvised. What do you feel passionately enough about that you might take matters of law and justice in your own hands?

Debate the play's perspective on justice. Was Ratchett/Cassetti justifiably murdered? Would it be appropriate to call his death an execution? Did Poirot and Monsieur Bouc make the morally/legally correct decision at the end of the play?

Debate the question of capital punishment. Is the execution of a criminal such as Cassetti, guilty of heinous crimes, ever justified? Why or why not? Consider the time period of the play, 1934, shortly after the mass devastation of the First World War and before the atrocities of the Holocaust in World War II. In his conclusion of the play, Poirot references how Europe is changing and how society is threatened when we do not uphold the law. In Christie's book, twelve people participate in the murder as opposed to eight in the play. Does this change negate a "trial by jury"?



The "Queen of Crime" Formula

Agatha Christie formulated the genre of a classic murder mystery with a large number of classic motifs.

These are:

- 1) A Murder is committed
- 2) Multiple suspects with concealed secrets
- 3) Gradually the secrets are discovered by the detective, uncovering the most shocking at the end
- 4) Gathering all the suspects in one room, the detective uses deductive reasoning to identify the guilty party

Agatha drew inspiration from her everyday life, her travels to the East on archeological digs with her husband, and other famous works of literature by Shakespeare, Tennyson, and the Bible. A natural observer, she drew on the men and women surrounding her, military men, lords and ladies, spinsters, and widows and doctors. Her grandson describes her as "a person who listened more than she talked, who saw more than she was seen."

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SYNOPSIS

After finishing his last case in Syria, Hercule Poirot, the famous detective, arrives at the Tokatlian Hotel in Istanbul. Called back to London for urgent business, he intends to book a first-class compartment on the Orient Express. Although surprisingly fully-booked for this time of year, the intervention of a fellow Belgian and friend, Monsieur Bouc, the director of the railway, secures Poirot a room on the train. While aboard the luxurious Orient Express, famous for its extravagance and elegance, Poirot meets a host of curious characters who will accompany him along his journey. Poirot meets a disagreeable man, Samuel Ratchett, an American businessman who propositions Poirot to investigate some threatening letters and who believes his life is in danger.

A snowdrift stops the train in its tracks and Ratchett is found brutally murdered, stabbed multiple times, in his locked compartment. Isolated with a killer in their midst, Detective Hercule Poirot is tasked by Mons. Bouc, with solving the murder. Provided with a variety of clues within Ratchett's room and a thorough investigation of the body, Poirot begins his investigation. He questions all the members on the train: A Hungarian Countess, an aging Russian Princess, her Swedish companion, Ratchett's secretary, a Minnesota housewife, a Scottish colonel, an English governess, and the French conductor, each claiming to have an alibi at the time of the murder. Poirot finds a trace of a burned note with the words "member little Daisy Armstrong," linking the murder to the famous kidnapping and subsequent murder of the Armstrong girl by Bruno Cassetti, who escaped justice and fled the country. All of the passengers are discovered to have a connection to the Armstrong case. Claiming a "second conductor" boarded the train, who was an enemy of Cassetti, murdered him and subsequently shoots Mary Debenham in the arm as he tries to escape. Isolated and unable to escape, Poirot gathers his suspects and uncovers the plot to avenge the murder of little Daisy Armstrong.



"The impossible could not have happened, therefore the impossible must be possible in spite of appearances."

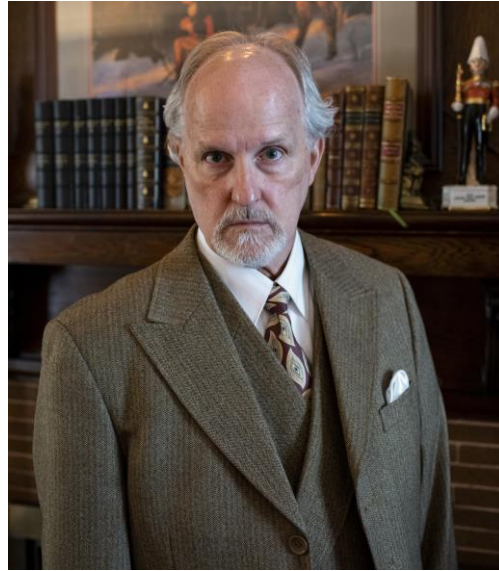
Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*

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THE CAST AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS



Hercule Poirot (Bill Campbell) A retired Belgian police officer. Poirot is Christie's most famous detective and is known for his short stature and long, curly moustache. Poirot is very intelligent, extremely aware and instinctual and is a brilliant detective.



Monsieur Bouc (Ward Emling) Bouc is the director of the Compagnie Wagon Lit and formerly worked for the Belgian police force with Poirot. Traveling together on the Orient Express during the murder, Bouc asks Poirot to take the case.



Mary Debenham (Chesley McKissack) Mary Debenham is a calm, cool, and unruffled lady. Suspicious of Mary because of a conversation between her and Colonel Arbuthnot in Istanbul, Poirot discovers that she is Daisy Armstrong's governess.



Hector McQueen (Jeremy Cooper) Hector is Ratchett's personal secretary and informs Poirot of the threatening letters to Ratchett. Hector's father was the district attorney for the state of New York assigned to the Armstrong case.

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Michel the Conductor (Drew Stark) The Conductor of the Orient Express. Poirot discovers that he is the father of the Armstrongs' maid, Suzanne, who was accused wrongly of Daisy's kidnapping and committed suicide.



Princess Dragomiroff (Viola Dacus) A Russian princess, Princess Dragomiroff is generally not amiable. She resents being questioned and admits to being a close friend of Linda Arden, Daisy's grandmother. Poirot discovers that she is the owner of the handkerchief found in Ratchett's room.



Greta Ohlsson (Keri Horn) Princess Dragomiroff's traveling companion, Greta Ohlsson is a simple Swedish lady who is extremely devout. Poirot discovers that she was Daisy Armstrong's nurse.



Countess Andrenyi (Audrey Bennett) A Countess through marriage, Elena Andrenyi's youthful beauty matches only her sharp intellect and knowledge of medicine. Favored by Poirot, she assists him in studying the crime scene and the murdered body. Poirot discovers that she is the sister of Sonia Armstrong and is the aunt of Daisy Armstrong.

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Helen Hubbard (Laurie Pascale) Claiming to be a housewife from Minnesota, Mrs. Hubbard provides constant interruption and diversion on the train. Mrs. Hubbard's compartment is next to Ratchett's and claims that a man burst into her compartment the night of the murder. Poirot discovers that she is Linda Arden, famous actress and grandmother of Daisy Armstrong.



Colonel Arbuthnot (Jon Whitney) A friend of Colonel Armstrong, and father of Daisy Armstrong. Like Mary Debenham, Poirot suspects him and Mary because of their conversation at the Tokatlian Hotel. Poirot uncovers that Colonel Arbuthnot and Charles Armstrong were soldiers together on the Northern Frontier in India.



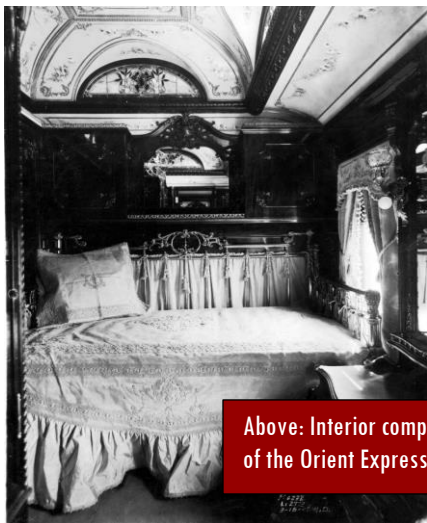
Samuel Ratchett (Larry Wells) A brusque, mysterious businessman who is found murdered on the train. Poirot discovers that his real name is Bruno Cassetti, who kidnapped and murdered the young Daisy Armstrong for ransom money. He escaped punishment because of his connections to organized crime and is found murdered.

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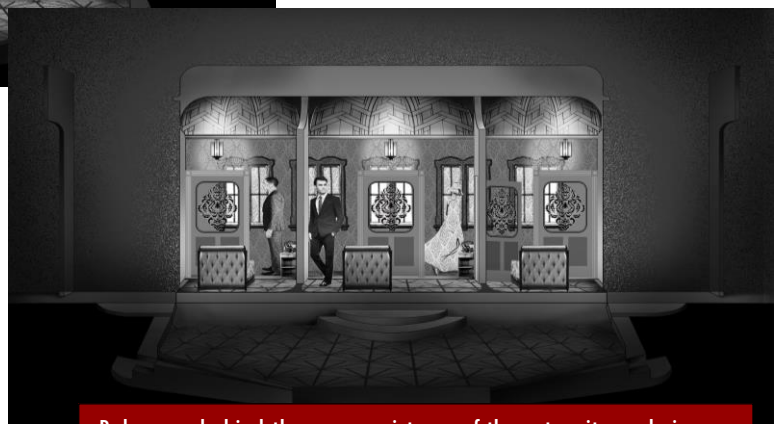
TECHNICAL DESIGN ELEMENTS OF NEW STAGE'S ORIENT EXPRESS



Sketches of New Stage's
Production *Agatha Christie's
Murder on the Orient Express*
Scenic Design by Dex Edwards



Above: Interior compartment
of the Orient Express



Below are behind-the-scenes pictures of the set as it was being built. The train set operates like a giant skateboard that rides on top of wheels bolted to the stage floor. As the scene shifts from one section of the train to the next, the "train" is pulled/pushed to the open section on view in the portal. The portal screen is also used for projections.



At left: Center portal and the
stage apron as it was being
painted. Notice the wheels
underneath the screen.



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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT, KEN LUDWIG

"I always write comedies. I define myself as a comic playwright."

Known by *The Times* as "the purveyor of light comedy to Middle America," Ken Ludwig is a multiple-award winning American playwright and theatre director whose work is not only recognized regionally across America, but also is produced internationally and translated in over 20 languages. Born in York, Pennsylvania, Ludwig received degrees from Haverford College, Harvard University and Trinity College at Cambridge University. His first Broadway play in 1989, *Lend Me a Tenor*, was nominated for nine Tony Awards and won three. His second commercial success came in 1992 with the musical *Crazy For You*, playing both on Broadway and London's West End and won the Tony Award, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, LA Drama Critics Circle, Helen Hayes Award, and Laurence Olivier Award for Best Musical. He has written over 28 plays, most notably: *Moon Over Buffalo* (1995), *Shakespeare in Hollywood* (2003), *Twentieth Century* (2004), *Fox on the Fairway* (2010), and *The Game's Afoot* (2011). He co-wrote the 1990 Kennedy Center Honors which appeared on CBS television and received an Emmy Award nomination. He adapted at Houston's Alley Theatre in 2008. Throughout his distinguished career he has penned numerous adaptations from notable literary works, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (2001), *The Three Musketeers* (2006), *Treasure Island* (2007), the George and Ira Gershwin film, *An American in Paris*, and his latest, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* in 2017.

"I love the theater," Ludwig declares in a phone interview by the *Hartford Courant* in 2018. "I grew up in a farming town in Pennsylvania. There was no professional theater there. At some point, when I was 10 years old, I put theater on a pedestal. I adored it. When I started writing plays, I made many of them about the theater, because I adored it so. Everything is great in the theater. Everybody is great in the theater."

The playwright is particularly fascinated by a certain period of history: the 1930s. "The 1920s feels like ancient history to us," Ludwig argues. "The '30s is a glamorous period." The Simplon Orient Express, the luxurious passenger train, was the epitome of sophistication and opulence when the novel was published in 1934. Europe was a place of tremendous change and intrigue following the First World War. Tensions were escalating toward a second major conflict to follow within a decade.

A self-proclaimed comic playwright, Ludwig's writing style is evident in the adaptation of Christie's popular novel. His interpretation of the characters of Mrs. Hubbard and the dry-wit of Princess Dragamiroff epitomize his use of a classic 'one-liner' and to provide levity for his audiences in contrast to the dramatic circumstances of the play. Ludwig claims that his mother's love of mystery influenced another common theme in his work: mystery. "My mother was a mystery fan," Ludwig says. "I got it from her." In a 2017 *New York Times* article, Ludwig explains to reporter Eric Grode that "I think the genres of comedy and mystery have a lot in common. Both start with the puzzle assembled, and suddenly the pieces are taken apart and thrown in the air. And then they finally come down, and all is well." The playwright admits, "I got a call from the Agatha Christie estate saying 'we're really going to spread our wings.'" He was offered the chance to adapt any of the novelist's books he chose. "I immediately thought of *Murder on the Orient Express*." The show premiered in March of 2017 at the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, New Jersey under the direction of Emily Mann.

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A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AGATHA CHRISTIE



Dame Agatha Christie, or Lady Mallowan, known as the best-selling novelist of all time, is recognized for her her contributions to the theatre and as well as literature.

Agatha Christie's 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections have sold over 2 billion copies and ranks third in the world of most-widely published books, behind Shakespeare and the Bible.

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born to a wealthy upper-middle class family in Torquay, Devon on September 15, 1890. She was the youngest of three children of an affluent American stockbroker and his Irish born wife and describes her childhood as "very happy." Agatha from an early age was surrounded by strong and independent women. Her mother insisted that Agatha receive a home education and that she not learn to read or write until she was eight. Largely home-instructed by her father, Agatha taught herself to read by the age of five. She acquired a love of reading, poetry, theatre, and music that she would foster throughout her lifetime. Her blissful childhood was interrupted by the death of her father in November of 1901. His death resulted in economic strain for the Christie family. Agatha's sister Madge moved to Abney Hall in Cheshire with her new husband and her brother joined the army and was sent to South Africa. In 1902, Agatha was sent to receive a formal education in Torquay and later to Paris for finishing school in 1905. Due to her mother's ill health upon Agatha's return to England in 1910, she and her mother left for a warmer climate and stayed many months in Cairo. Agatha's social activities focused on her search for a suitable husband until she met and fell in love with



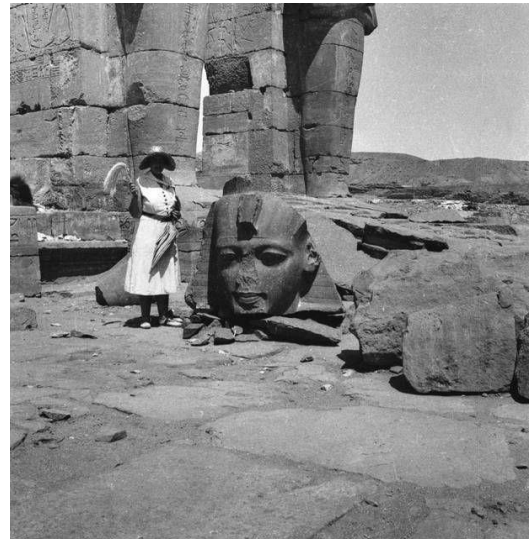
Archibald Christie, an army officer who joined the Royal Flying Corps in 1913.

The outbreak of World War I in August of 1914 solidified their relationship and they were married on Christmas Eve of 1914. While her husband served in the war, Agatha involved herself in the war effort, serving in the Voluntary Aid Detachment of the Red Cross Hospital in Torquay. She tended to wounded soldiers and later worked in the dispensary as a pharmacy assistant in 1917. This wartime introduction to medicine and pharmacology gave her a unique opportunity to become acquainted with a number of poisons to be used in her later novels.

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After the modest literary success of her first detective novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1916, and the birth of her daughter Rosalind in August 1919, the Christies did extensive traveling to promote the British Empire Exhibition. The death of Agatha's mother, Archie's infidelity and, subsequently, his request for a divorce in 1926 was devastating for Agatha and contributed to her infamous ten-day disappearance that made national news. Agatha was found after ten days, disoriented and suffering from amnesia, and she refused to speak publicly about the event for the rest of her life. The Christies divorced in 1928, yet kept the Christie name for her writing. In 1928, Agatha began to write under the name Mary Westmacott, a pen-name she created to free herself from her larger body of literary work in crime fiction.

Following her life-long desire to travel on the Orient Express, she left England on her first solo trip abroad to Istanbul and, later to Baghdad in the autumn of 1928. On an archaeological tour of Iraq in 1930, she met a young archeologist named Max Mallowan, fell in love for the second time in her life, and they later married. Their marriage would continue happily for 46 years; she provided companionship on his archeological digs in the East and that would later influence her writings. As a rule, Agatha wrote two or three books a year and would write a chapter or two in the morning and join her husband at the site in the afternoons.



During the Second World War, Agatha worked in a pharmacy at University College Hospital in London and continued to develop her passion and knowledge of poisons. Later in life, she was also for many years President of the local dramatic society. Adaptation of her novels gained wide popularity on both the stage and in film. Agatha and Max became one of few married couples to be honored in their own right. She was promoted to Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her contribution to literature in 1971, three years after her husband was knighted for his archeological work in 1968. Agatha Christie died on January 12, 1976 at age 85 leaving a literary legacy.



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AGATHA CHRISTIE AND THE THEATRE

Known as the most successful female playwright of all time, Agatha Christie left an indelible mark on theatre history. In 1954, Agatha Christie became the first female playwright to have three plays running simultaneously in London's West End. *The Mousetrap*, originally written as a 20-minute radio drama, is Agatha's longest running play, having first opened in November 1952 and still runs to this day in London's West End. She became a fan of theatre at an early age, attending weekly performances with her sister Madge and brother Monty. "One of the greatest joys in life was the local theatre," said Christie in her autobiography. "We were all lovers of the theatre in my family."

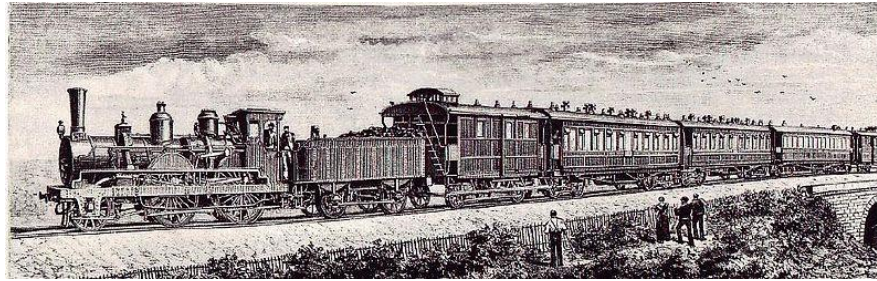
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd was the first of Christie's literary works to be adapted to the stage by Michael Morton in his production titled *Alibi*. Her disappointment in the portrayal of Hercule Poirot in Morton's version inspired her to write her first published play, *Black Coffee* in 1930. This is the only one of her stage plays written by Christie to feature Poirot as a character. She wrote Poirot's character out of the plot of four of her novels: *Appointment with Death*, *Go Back for Murder* (based on *Five Little Pigs*), *The Hollow*, and *Murder on the Nile*. She was concerned that the character would pull too much focus on stage. Christie's adaptations of her earlier works changed the fate of her characters, added alternate characters, or changed subplots to suit her audience. She also drew from her larger body of works including her short stories. Her classic courtroom drama, *Witness for the Prosecution* was based on one of her short stories, as well as *The Stranger*, *The Wasp's Nest*, and *Yellow Iris*.

Agatha Christie is best known for her murder mysteries, yet she also wrote family dramas and historic plays under the name of Mary Westmacott. *A Daughter's A Daughter* is one of her Westmacott novels adapted to make it to the stage and centers around the relationship between a mother and daughter and takes a dark turn at the mother's second chance at love. She excelled at creating complex characters, particularly of strong women of a certain age. Although she only ended up writing 20 stage plays, her legacy continues to live on. Playwrights like Ken Ludwig have dramatized her novels, yet, like Christie, take liberties when adapting from the original novel. Ludwig deletes four of the original twelve characters in his version of the novel. He also modifies the persona of certain characters, such as Colonel Arbuthnot who he envisions as "distinctly Scottish," (possibly because of Sean Connery's role in the 1974 film) and a "Minnesota housewife" for the character of Mrs. Hubbard. Leslie Darbon eliminates the character of Poirot from his *Cards on the Table*. In Sarah Punshon and Johann Hari's *The Secret Adversary*, numerous supporting roles are played by a small cast of characters, while the lead actor and actress play Christie's Tommy and Tuppence.

Remarking about the opening of *Witness for the Prosecution*, Christie describes it as "the only first night (she) enjoyed. 'I was happy, radiantly happy, and made even more so by the applause of the audience.'" Christie wrote, "I find that writing plays is much more fun than writing books. For one long descriptions of places and people. And you must write quickly if only to keep the mood while it lasts, and to keep the dialogue flowing naturally."

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

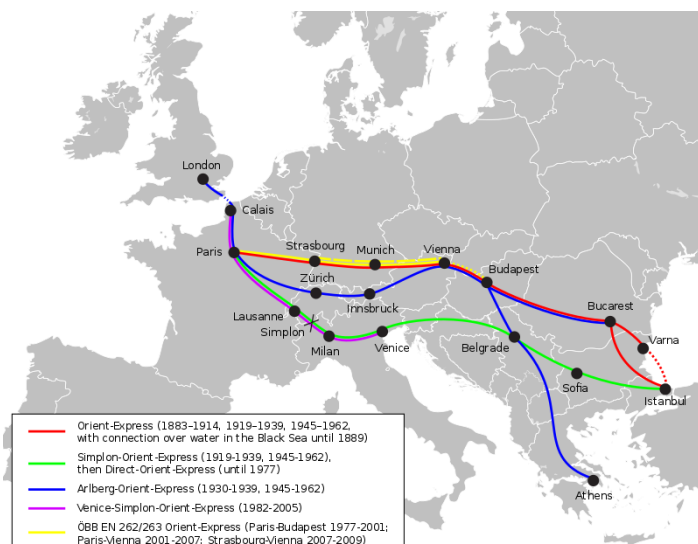
INSPIRATION FOR MURDER: TRAVELS TO THE EAST AND THE LINDBERGH KIDNAPPING

The Simplon-Orient Express

The first railway locomotive train was built in England in 1804. Generally dirty and crowded, trains in the early 1800's were made to transport goods and workers. George Pullman, an American entrepreneur, designed the first luxury train cars, with sleeper coaches and a service staff for its passengers. While visiting America, the Belgian Georges Nagelmackers was inspired to recreate the experience in Europe. In 1883, The Compagnie Internationale de Wagons-Lits (wagon lit means "sleeper cars") designed a luxurious long-distance passenger train that traveled from Paris and Constantinople (later Istanbul). Described by Monseieur Bouc as "poetry on wheels," the Orient Express was a showcase of luxury and comfort, with mahogany walls and comfortable seating, and included multiple sleeping coaches with a restaurant coach featuring the finest European cuisine. Due to King Leopold II of Belgium's connections with the royal families across Europe, the train could cross through countries without border delays. Royalty, diplomats, businessmen, and European travelers all patronized the most popular and fastest transcontinental European train, the approximate duration of a trip from Istanbul to Paris was 60 hours. A single ticket by today's standards would be a few thousand dollars today. Trains service continued until 1977, when the Orient Express was replaced by faster, more modern trains and air travel.

Train service continued to expanded service across the continent and evolve with multiple train routes as European borders changed throughout the century.

During World War I, service on the Orient Express was suspended and later reopened with a new southerly route through Milan, Venice, and Trieste and the opening of the Simplon Tunnel along the border of Italy and Austria. Known as the Simplon Orient Express, this train route became the most important rail route between Paris and Istanbul from 1919-1962 and is the one featured in Agatha Christie's novel.



STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

Agatha Christie professed her love for the Orient Express and first traveled on the Orient Express in late 1928. She made note of the details of the carriages and clues such as the position of door handles along the train to be featured in her novels. She noted that a blizzard near Turkey that marooned the Orient Express for six days contributed to her idea of isolating the passengers onboard the train.

In December of 1931, flooding from rainfall washed away sections of track on one of Agatha's trips from one of her husband's archeological digs for twenty-four hours. In a letter to Max she writes, "My darling, what a journey! Started out from Istanbul in a violent thunder storm. We went very slowly during the night and about 3 a.m. stopped altogether." She notes in her biography how several of the passengers on her train inspired both the plot and characters in her novel, including the outspoken character of Mrs. Hubbard, an American named Mrs. Hilton.

Tokatlian Hotel

Built in the late nineteenth century, these luxury hotels were considered to be the first European-style hotels to be built in Turkey. The high ceiling walls and furnishings from Europe made these hotels popular tourist destinations among high society. Christie uses the famed hotel and the Orient Express in her two of her literary works: *Murder on the Orient Express*, and in the short story series, *Parker Pyne Investigates: Have You Got Everything You Want?*

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*Pablo Picasso

Born in 1881, this Spanish painter and sculptor is regarded as one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. He is known for co-founding the Cubist movement in art and the wide variety of styles and periods in which he painted. A prolific artist throughout his lifetime, he studied objects and “analyzed” their shapes in irregular patterns. Heavily influenced by African artefacts at the ethnographic museum in Palais du Trocadero, the artist defied convention by introducing them in his art, moving further away from classical forms to a more modern art. An example of this African-influenced Period is the *Les Femmes d'Alger*, represented by the two figures on the right.

The Lindbergh Baby Kidnapping

On May 12, 1932, Charles Augustus Lindbergh, Jr was discovered four miles from the Lindbergh estate outside of Trenton, New Jersey, with a hole in his skull as well as several other fractures and body parts missing. Son of the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, the tragedy captured the hearts of the nation and helped to mobilize federal efforts, including FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, to help state authorities in the search. The child had been missing for three months after being kidnapped from the Lindbergh home. Over the course of the investigation, the Lindberghs received seven ransom letters, the first outlining the kidnapping and requested \$50,000 (approximately \$860,400 by today's standards) to be delivered to an undisclosed location in small bills.

After the ransom had been delivered, police noticed that many of the marked bills were being used on the upper east side of Manhattan. After tracking one of the \$10 bills used at a local gas station, the police were led to Richard Hauptman, a German immigrant, who was discovered to have possession of \$14,000 of the original \$50,000 used in the baby's ransom. Although some experts theorized that Hauptman was the scapegoat for a larger and more complicated ransom scheme gone awry, he was executed four years after the kidnapping. As a result of this case, Congress passed the Federal Kidnapping Law, also known as the “Lindbergh Law”, which made transporting a kidnapping victim across state lines a federal offense.



STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

REPERCUSSIONS OF WORLD WAR I EUROPE

Coined as “the war to end all wars,” The First World War was one of the largest conflicts in history, involving approximately 60 million Europeans and was one of the deadliest wars to date. Military conflict was the unfortunate result of a series of diplomatic treaties across the continent, after the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian heir by a Serbian nationalist. Europe suffered nine million casualties and seven million civilian deaths, yet shaped the future in the years to come. Many attribute the fallout from the first great conflict, including the rise of Adolf Hitler, justification for the even greater war 20 years later.



During the summer of 1914, Germany was poised for war and made plans to attack France by crossing the two neutral counties between them, Luxembourg and Belgium. Both countries refused free passage of the German troops and were consequently invaded. The Belgian army held their position in unoccupied Belgium until 1918 and the country's government was relocated to Le Havre, France. The Treaty of Versailles concluded World War I in 1919. Under the terms of the Treaty, Germany was forced to accept guilt for the war, demilitarize, lose a quarter of its European territory, and pay \$31.4 billion (almost \$442 billion today) in reparations. The Treaty also abolished neutrality for countries like Belgium.

Four empires collapsed at the end of World War I: The Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire gave Britain and France colonies in the Middle East. Torn apart by revolution, Russia's monarchy collapsed and the Bolshevik Party, led by Vladimir Lenin, took control. Countries like Belgium were seriously damaged by war and lost almost a quarter of their national wealth. The stock market crash of 1929 and the economic depression that resulted in the United States began to affect their European neighbors. The social democracy movement of the late 19th century and its leaders in the Socialist party gained momentum in post-war Europe, as well as entrench the persisting aversion to socialism among the middle class and anti-Bolsheviks. German nationalists blamed the new Weimar Government for their concessions and the Jews for the defeat of Germany. Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1934 and completely disregarded the Treaty of Versailles to fulfill his expansionist ideas and nationalist views. The result of his anti-Semitic policies caused the systematic murder and extermination of over six million Jews across Europe. The 1934 setting of Ludwig's adaptation seem a direct commentary on the justification for murder and Poirot's concern of ethical code and equal justice under the law.

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

THE CREATION OF HERCULE POIROT

The character of Hercule Poirot remains one of the best known literary characters and famous detectives of all time. Inspired to write mystery novels by Conan Doyle's early Sherlock Holmes stories, Agatha drew inspiration from the world around her which included her affluent family's circle of friends. Historian C.V. Wedgwood wrote, "Her social settings, her characters and her dialogue are always accurately observed. There is no better all-round craftsman in the field." Agatha Christie's sister challenged Agatha to write her own detective story. In August of 1914, there was a colony of Belgian refugees who were living in a parish in her hometown of Torquay. Even her famous Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot, is thought to be inspired by the Belgian refugees of World War I. In her autobiography Christie wrote "there were all types of refugees. How about a refugee (Belgian) police officer?" She desired a great name for her famous detective. The name Hercules came first, then Poirot. Poirot was introduced to the world in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920 as an immaculately groomed and finely-dressed man whose head stood five foot-four inches tall and was "exactly the shape of an egg." However, his famous mustache, very stiff and military, would be his most distinguishing characteristic. The neatness of his attire and caricature-like appearance would be the facade for a calculating mind; his powers of deductive reasoning and "little grey cells" are able to miraculously solve even the most difficult of cases. Poirot uses psychology and his extensive knowledge of human nature to sort through his list of suspects, relying less on physical evidence than the order and method of the crime. As a writer, Christie would make notes in dozens of notebooks, working out all the details and clues in her head before putting pen to paper. Never knowing where her ideas would spring from, Christie explains that: "plots come to me at such odd moments, when I am walking down the street, or examining a hat shop.. suddenly a splendid idea comes into my head. Nothing turns out quite in the way that you thought it would when you are sketching out notes for the first chapter, or walking about muttering to yourself and seeing the story unroll."



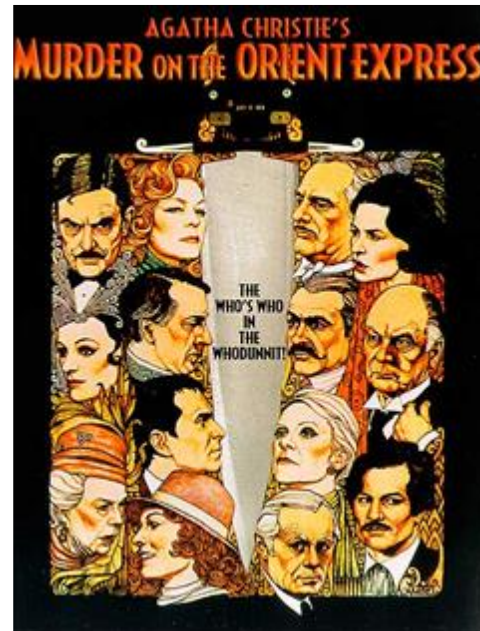
Noted as the "greatest mind in Europe," Poirot's characteristic ego became burdensome for Agatha. Noting in her diary as early as the late 1930's, Christie found Poirot "insufferable" and by the 1960's "an egotistical creep." She resisted the temptation to kill off her Belgian detective while he was still popular among her readers. Christie believed that she was an entertainer whose job it was to please her readers who adored the Belgian detective. In contrast, Agatha enjoyed her character of Miss Jane Marple more, perhaps because she identified more with the unassuming protagonist. Christie explained why she never featured both of her sleuths in one of her novels because "Hercule Poirot, a complete egoist, would not like being taught his business or having suggestions made to him by an elderly spinster lady. Hercule Poirot- a professional sleuth- would not be at home at all in Miss Marple's world." Despite her indifference, her prolific writing early in her career of Poirot's mystery novels outnumber Miss Marple's two to one. The final Poirot novel was *Curtain*, published in 1975. Poirot is the only fictional character to have an obituary published in *The New York Times* as well as appear on the front page of the paper in August 6th, 1975.

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

FROM PAGE TO STAGE AND SCREEN

Murder on the Orient Express first appeared as a serialization in the *Saturday Evening Post* under the title *Murder on the Calais Coach* in the fall of 1933. The novel was published first in the United Kingdom in January of 1934 and later that February in the United States. Reception for the novel was favorable, and as noted in the *Times Literary Supplement* that “Mrs. Christie makes an improbable tale very real, and keeps her readers enthralled and guessing to the end.” *Murder* was first adapted to a film in 1974 with Albert Finney as Poirot.

Often noted as a turning point in the history of Christie’s adaptation to the screen, the film had an all-star cast that included Sean Connery, Lauren Bacall, and Ingrid Bergman. Albert Finney earned a Best Actor Oscar nomination and Ingrid Bergman won for Best Supporting Actress as Greta Olsson. The film was directed by Sidney Lumet and earned six Academy Award nominations. Considered too young to play Poirot, the 38 year old actor had to wear a false nose and body padding made of cotton wool. Although Agatha enjoyed the film, she commented that “I wrote that my detective had the finest mustache England, but he didn’t in the film. I thought that was a pity. Why shouldn’t he have the best moustache?”



The first version made for TV was in 2001 with Alfred Molina as Poirot. David Suchet, who has made a 25 year career including a BAFTA nomination and two Satellite Award nominations for playing the character of Poirot, starred in the 2010 80-minute episode of the TV series *Agatha Christie's Poirot*. The latest film adaptation was made in 2017 starring and directed by Kenneth Branagh. He was joined by another all-star cast of contemporary movie stars, including Johnny Depp, Michelle Pfeiffer, Penelope Cruz and Dame Judi Dench.

Ken Ludwig’s stage play premiered at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey in March of 2017 under the direction of Emily Mann. New Stage’s production is the regional premiere.



STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

INSPIRATIONAL QUOTABLES OF AGATHA CHRISTIE/POIROT

Quotables of Agatha Christie, the author:

Dogs are wise. They crawl away into a quiet corner and lick their wounds and do not rejoin the world until they are whole once more.

I have sometimes been wildly, despairingly, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing.

Every murderer is probably somebody's old friend.

It is ridiculous to set a detective story in New York City. New York City is itself a detective story.

An archaeologist is the best husband a woman can have. The older she gets the more interested he is in her.

But surely for everything you have to love you have to pay some price.

I specialize in murders of quiet, domestic interest.

If one sticks too rigidly to one's principles, one would hardly see anybody.

From the mind of Poirot:

Every murderer is probably somebody's old friend. You cannot mix up sentiment and reason. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*

I do not need to bend and measure the footprints and pick up the cigarette ends and examine the bent blades of grass. It is enough for me to sit back in my chair and think. *Five Little Pigs*

It is not the past that matters, but the future. *Death on the Nile*

Understand this, I mean to arrive at the truth. The truth, however ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to seekers after it. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

It is a profound belief of mine that if you can induce a person to talk to you for long enough, on any subject whatever! Sooner or later they will give themselves away. *After the Funeral*

If you will allow Poirot to offer you a piece of wise advice: the pursuit of revenge is rarely a good idea. *The Mystery of Three Quarters*

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Teacher's Guide to Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. www.harperacademic.com

Florian, Kelly and Hansen, David. "*And Then There Were None* Study Guide". Great Lakes Theater.

"About Agatha Christie", "The Creation of Hercule Poirot" Agatha Christie Ltd.
www.AgathaChristie.com

DeVellis, Kristin. "*Murder on the Orient Express* Study Guide". Hartford Stage.

Christie, Agatha. *Agatha Christie, An Autobiography*. Harper 2011.

Ken Ludwig: The Short Biography. Ken Ludwig Playwright. December 2017. www.kenludwig.com

"Agatha Christie Novels Adapted for the Stage" and "Great Roles in Agatha Christie Plays" by Chris Chan. A Concord Theatricals Publication. April 2019. www.breakingcharacter.com

"Belgium and World War I" www.britannica.com

"What was the Inspiration for the 'Murder on the Orient Express'" by Natalie Escobar. November 2017. www.smithsonian.com

"The Tragic Story of the Lindbergh Baby Kidnapping" by Katie Serena. December 2017.
www.Allthatsinteresting.com/lindbergh-baby-kidnapping

"Ken Ludwig's Lighthearted, Comic-Take on 'Murder on the Orient Express' at Hartford Stage" by Christopher Arnett. February 2018.

"Agatha Christie", "Ken Ludwig", "Murder on the Orient Express". www.wikipedia.org

A stylized, handwritten signature of the name "Agatha Christie" in black ink, centered on a white background.

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*TEACHER EVALUATION FORM FOR AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

Name: _____ School: _____

What is your overall reaction to the production?

How would you rate the production values of the performance (costumes, set, props, lighting, special effects)?

How did your students react to the production?

Please comment on the educational value of the program.

What is your overall reaction to the question and answer (talk-back) session?

How did you hear about New Stage's production of *Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express*? What other plays would you like your students to see?

How could this Study Guide be more effective for use in your classroom? Please explain.

Please have your students fill out the enclosed student evaluation forms. We want to hear from them too! Evaluations not only help us improve our programming, but help us find sponsorship for bringing quality theatre to you!! Thank you for your continued support!

Please return this form with any additional comments to:

New Stage Theatre Education

1100 Carlisle Street, Jackson, MS 39202, or email at: education@newstagetheatre.com

STUDY GUIDE: AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

STUDENT EVALUATION FORM- AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS*

Name: _____ School: _____

What was your overall reaction to the play?

How would you rate the production values of the play (costumes, scenery, props, lighting, special effects)?

What was your favorite part of the play?

Did you learn anything from this production? If so, what?

Which character in the play did you most identify with? Why?

Have you ever seen professional theatre production at New Stage or elsewhere? Would you recommend a friend to see a production at New Stage and why?

What other stories would you enjoy seeing staged by live actors?

Other comments and observations:

Please return this form with any additional comments to:

New Stage Theatre Education

1100 Carlisle Street, Jackson, MS 39202, or email at: education@newstagetheatre.com