

## *Synopsis*

*Arsenic and Old Lace* is a dark comedy about a man finding out that his family is a little stranger than he originally thought. It opens with two innocent elderly ladies who are full of good works and charity. They are known as do-gooders and are beloved by the community. Their nephew Teddy, who believes he is Theodore Roosevelt, is considered harmless, and everyone plays along with his delusions. Enter their second nephew, Mortimer, a cynical theatre critic whose one soft spot is the love he has for his aunts. During his most recent visit to his aunts, he becomes engaged to the girl next door, who he has been dating for a few months, and he and the aunts decide to hold a little celebration. It sounds like a perfect family setting, right?

Imagine Mortimer's surprise when he casually lifts up the window seat in his aunt's living room and discovers a body! His aunts assure him it is nothing to worry about - it is just one of the gentlemen they have helped out by lacing elderberry wine with a little poison to send him on to his reward. Teddy digs graves for the gentlemen in the cellar, believing them to be poor Yellow Fever victims who have succumbed to the disease while working on the Panama Canal.

From here everything begins to go awry as Mortimer tries to keep a lid on his aunts' supposed good deeds, but things just don't go his way. To complicate matters further, there are lonely old men who come to the house looking for lodging; his unhinged brother, Jonathan, and sidekick Dr. Einstein, who drop in unexpectedly that night with their own set of problems; a wannabe playwright; and his new fiancée, who just won't leave him alone.

Will Mortimer be able to sort out all the secrets and stop his aunts from helping more lonely old men? Will Mortimer be able to stop Jonathan from taking out his revenge on him after holding a twenty-year grudge? Will he be able to escape from the wannabe playwright and his never-ending script? Will Mortimer be able to keep his engagement and marry the love of his life? Will justice and peace reign, and will all be right with the world???

## *Author*

Joseph Kesselring started as a frustrated playwright. He wanted to write plays in New York, but he wasn't able to make that happen right away. Kesselring taught voice and headed up the theatre efforts at Bethel College in Newton, Kansas for two years. Later, he returned to his home state of New York and joined a small theatre company as its playwright. He eventually left the company and began to write freelance. Kesselring was known for writing twelve plays that were produced, four of which made it to Broadway. While New York critics knew who he was, they considered his comedy amateurish and underdeveloped, making *Arsenic and Old Lace* a pleasant surprise for theatre goers and his most successful play.

Kesselring's success is largely due to the two men who produced the play, Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse. These two men were a highly successful playwriting team. Their successes include *Sound of Music* and the Pulitzer-prize winning *State of the Union*. Howard Lindsay's wife, Dorothy Stickney, was a well-known Broadway actress. Kesselring sent Stickney a copy of a play titled *Bodies in Our Cellar*, a play about old ladies poisoning lonely old men, in hopes she would play one of the old ladies. As she laughed her way through the play, Mr. Lindsay wanted to know what was so funny. She showed it to him, and he immediately saw its potential, though it was uneven and at times distasteful. He contacted his writing partner, Russel Crouse, and together they decided to produce it. Over the course of its pre-Broadway run, Lindsay and Crouse overhauled the play so that it became a laugh-out-loud comedy. *Arsenic and Old Lace* became one of the most successful comedies of the 1940s.

## *Characters*

**Abby Brewster** – An elderly lady whose kindness and generosity have won over Brooklyn, although no one knows about her most beloved charity work.

**The Rev. Dr. Harper** – A recently widowed pastor whose daughter is recently engaged to Mortimer Brewster, Abby Brewster's nephew. Rev. Harper looks on this relationship with hesitation because of Mortimer's job-related theatre attendance, which Rev. Harper views as morally degrading.

**Teddy Brewster** – A nephew of Abby Brewster who believes that he is Theodore Roosevelt.

**Officer Brophy** – A police officer who regularly visits the Brewsters.

**Officer Klein** – Another police officer.

**Martha Brewster** – Abby Brewster's sister, and aunt to Mortimer and Teddy. She enthusiastically helps Abby in their charity work.

**Elaine Harper** – Rev. Harper's daughter, and fiancée to Mortimer Brewster who can't understand Mortimer's sudden reversal in his feelings towards her.

**Mortimer Brewster** – A cynical theatre critic who has recently fallen in love with the girl next door, Elaine Harper. During a visit to his aunts' home he discovers what happens when his aunts give a glass of their homemade elderberry wine to lonely old men.

**Mr. Gibbs** – A lonely old man who comes to Abby and Martha Brewster's house in search of a room to rent and stays to enjoy a glass of elderberry wine.

**Jonathan Brewster** – The other nephew of the Brewster sisters and brother to Mortimer and Teddy. When he shows up after being away from home for many years, no one recognizes him.

**Dr. Einstein** – Jonathan's sidekick. He claims to be a plastic surgeon and has a close relationship to his drinking flask.

**Officer O'Hara** – The frustrated playwright who has been writing his life's work while working as a police officer. Tonight he is in luck because he has finally met Mortimer Brewster, who can help him get his play on Broadway.

**Lieutenant Rooney** – The frustrated supervisor of the police officers who are in and out of the Brewster home.

**Mr. Witherspoon** – The director of Happy Dale Sanitarium who happens to also be a lonely old man.

## *Setting*

*Arsenic and Old Lace* is set in the autumn of 1941. WWII has begun, but the United States has not yet officially entered. The tensions of pre-war America do intrude on the lives of Martha and Abby Brewster; however, stepping into their home is like stepping back into the Victorian period, a simpler time or as Rev. Harper says, “The virtues of another day – they’re all here in this house. The gentle virtues that went out with candle light and good manners and low taxes.”

## *Glossary*

**Alice** – Teddy refers to Elaine as Alice. Alice was Theodore Roosevelt's oldest daughter. She was an outgoing and independent young woman who became an overnight celebrity when her father became president.

**August Strindberg** – A playwright that many have called the father of expressionism within theatre. His plays are often dark and involve great suffering by the protagonist of the play.

**Banns** – A published announcement in a church of a couple's intention to marry. This is to provide the community the opportunity to raise any objections to the marriage.

**Boris Karloff** – An actor known for portraying monsters, such as Frankenstein's Monster in *Frankenstein* and Imhotep in *The Mummy*. He originated the role of Jonathan Brewster on Broadway.

**Dyspepsia** - Indigestion

**Fighting Bob Evans** – A highly-effective naval officer whose career spanned from the US Civil War to the Spanish-American War.

**General Goethals** – The man President Roosevelt recruited to finish the building of the Panama Canal.

**Hellzapoppin** – A musical revue that was a huge success in the 1930's. It relied heavily on sketch comedy. The audience would often not know what would happen next as the actors regularly used audience participation.

**Judith Anderson** – A famous Broadway actress known for playing tragic leading woman roles, like Lady Macbeth. In film, she was nominated for an Oscar for portraying the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers, in *Rebecca*.

**Lock** – A device that allows water levels to change on a river so that boats can better maneuver it.

**Nature Faker** – A controversy over how to portray nature, realistically or idealistically.

President Roosevelt was firmly in the realism camp and denounced authors who wrote books that represented nature in an overly noble way, such as Jack London, as nature fakers or those who misrepresent nature.

**Panama Canal** –A project to allow passage from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean without having to go completely around South America. In 1904, the United States bought the rights to build the Panama Canal from the French. The project began in 1880 and met with many problems, one of the main ones being Yellow Fever and other diseases killing the workers. Even though the US took over in 1904, the Panama would not be completed until 1914.

**Pirandello** – He was an Italian author and playwright whose plays were often tragic farce with plot twists coming out of nowhere. His characters would believe a situation to be true, only to find out that their assumptions were completely wrong.

**Proletariat** – the working class, the everyman.

**San Juan Hill** - During the Spanish-American War in 1898, Roosevelt resigned from the Department of the Navy to volunteer in the U.S. Army. He helped to form and recruit a cavalry regiment called the Rough Riders, who participated in taking two crucial positions that effectively ended the fighting in Cuba: San Juan Hill and Kettle Hill.

**Taft** – Teddy looks with disapproval on Mr. Witherspoon and calls him Taft. William Taft was elected President after Roosevelt left office. Roosevelt had practically crowned him his successor, and they were great friends. However, over time they became bitter enemies and Roosevelt ran for President and lost against Taft when Taft ran for reelection.

**Theodore Roosevelt** - Abby and Martha's nephew Teddy believes himself to be Theodore Roosevelt, one of the most prominent political figures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Born in New York City in 1858, Theodore Roosevelt entered politics in his mid-twenties. He became a local assemblyman in the early 1880s and then failed at running for the Mayor of New York City in 1886. In 1895, he became the Police Commissioner of New York City, where he would cause sweeping reforms to a highly corrupt police force. In 1897, President McKinley appointed him the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. He then ran and won as Vice President on President McKinley's reelection campaign in 1900. After only six months as Vice President, Roosevelt became President of the United States when President McKinley was assassinated in 1901. He served out the term and then ran and won as President in 1904. After leaving the presidency in 1909, his influence would continue to be felt in politics until his death in 1919.

**Walter Winchell** – A gossip columnist and radio personality.

**Yellow Fever** – A disease found in sub-tropical countries such as Cuba and Panama. It is spread by mosquitoes and can cause liver damage which leads to death. Theodore Roosevelt came across Yellow Fever and its devastating effects during the Spanish-American War. It also caused many deaths among the workers building the Panama Canal. President Roosevelt brought in people to better the living conditions of the workers and so cut down the cases of Yellow Fever in Panama.

## *For Further Thought*

### **Discussion Ideas**

Watch the 1944 movie of *Arsenic and Old Lace*. How is the movie different from the play?

What was the purpose of the Panama Canal?

What caused America to go to war in the Spanish-American War?

What is a theater critic?

### **Creative Writing Ideas**

Write a biography of Mortimer.

If you were Elaine, would you have still married Mortimer? Why or why not?

Write what happens after the play ends.

How did Jonathan and Einstein become companions?

Write a new story for your favorite character(s).

### **Project Ideas**

Create an ad for Grandfather Brewster's medicine.

Draw a timeline of Roosevelt's presidency.

Make a Lady Baltimore Cake.

Sketch the set of *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

Design your own costumes for a character.

Write the play that Mortimer went to see, *Murder Will Out*.

Create a playbill or poster for *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

### **Report or Essay Ideas**

Interview a cast or crew member and write about their role in the production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

Write a guide to theater etiquette.

Write a biography of Roosevelt, his daughter Alice, or Joseph Kesselring.

Explain what happened at San Juan Hill and why it is significant in the Spanish-American War.

Compare and contrast *Arsenic and Old Lace* to other movies or plays which use farce and/or black comedy.

Compare and contrast the aunts' "charity" and the modern euthanasia movement.