

# Row Levin Set 'Deathtrap'

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**WHEN** the curtain in Ira Levin's mind went up on "Deathtrap" a half-dozen years ago, he thought of the comedy-thriller story as a book but somehow it wouldn't sit still between covers and kept making itself into play.

"Deathtrap," the sort of thriller you don't see much of any more, opened last week on Broadway at the Music Box, where a good part of the intermission chatter turns on what can possibly take place in the second act that would follow a first act that seems to tell—almost—a complete story in itself.

It won't do to explain "Deathtrap" in detail because that would be to give away a plot that is continuously rounding upon itself and is continuously being peeled, like an artichoke, to disclose new layers. Suffice it to say that it is about an older playwright who has not done anything to distinguish himself since a murder mystery that was a hit years ago. He receives, for reading, a mystery play from a student in a seminar he had conducted and it is a smasher, enough to make him say he would murder to get it under his name.

## He Works in Two Forms

There follow a series of melodramatic twists and turns and let's let it go at that. It is enough to get a conversation started with Ira Levin, the bearded 45-year-old author who writes books and plays and has managed to make big successes in both directions. One might mention "A Kiss Before Dying," "Rosemary's Baby" and "The Boys From Brazil" in print and "No Time for Sergeants" (he did the adaptation of Mac Hyman's story for the stage hit in 1955), and "Critic's Choice" for Broadway. So much for credentials.

"I've written five novels, all successful, and eight plays, of which three were successful," he said in a recent interview, counting "Deathtrap" and the two mentioned above as successes. "I am probably one of the most produced living playwrights," he added with a smile.

As for that second act of "Deathtrap," the one an onlooker might believe caused problems, Mr. Levin said that he, too, had worried about it while he was yet enmeshed in fashioning the first act.

"It was not until I was halfway through that first act that Act II came to me. It wasn't difficult. It came into being by itself. When it struck me, it was as much of a surprise to me as it has been to the audiences ever since." As for "Deathtrap's" final scene, which disappointed even some of the play's most ardent admirers, Mr. Levin said, "I am very fond of the last scene myself. I always thought of this as the sort of play that is being written

The other night at the Music Box, Mr. Levin was standing in the lobby during intermission, unrecognized by almost everyone, and members of the audience were speculating on whether this character was really dead and who would be alive or uncovered in the next act and was there anything more to say.

## Thrillers of Yesteryear

His companion was his mother, diminutive woman who had just come up from Florida and was seeing “Deathtrap” for the first time. Did she like it? Oh, yes, came the reply, accompanied by a frisson of horror that quite suited a thriller. Mrs. Levin likes thrillers and so does her son.

There has been a paucity of thrillers on Broadway in recent years. The protagonist of “Deathtrap,” portrayed by John Wood, recalls a number of them from bygone days: “Dial M for Murder,” “Ten Little Indians,” “Night Must Fall,” “Angel Street,” “Witness for the Prosecution,” “Sleuth.”

“It’s a noble tradition,” said Mr. Levin. “Years ago you had at least one a season. When I was a kid, I used to love to see them. The problem with getting them on stage today is that there are so many done on TV. To succeed on stage, a suspense play has to have an extra dimension. Here, it’s the satirical point that gives it that.”

Mr. Levin is still stagestruck despite his lower batting average in the theater than with books. “Rosemary’s Baby” sold five million paperback copies in this country alone, has just been translated into Maltese (it’s already in most larger languages) and was a hit film. “The Boys From Brazil,” which is newer, has sold a couple of million copies and is scheduled to emerge as a movie in November. So why pass time writing for the theater?

“Part of it is that you get such quick reaction from something on stage,” he said. “I have missed only four performances since we started doing ‘Deathtrap’ out of town and in preview. After years of writing books and never getting immediate evidence that things are working as you want them to it. It’s gratifying to hear the audience come on right away.

“Sometimes you get a letter from someone who read your book and tells you that such and such a chapter made them jump out of the chair. Very nice, but it’s still secondhand. At the Music Box, they jump out of the chair right in front of you.”

Mr. Levin has always had a thriller turn of mind. In his senior year at New York University, he submitted script for a CBS competition. He was a runner-up, but someone who read it suggested he take it to an agent. It was a thriller called “Lights Out” and became a television half-hour suspense tale—his first writing effort.

As the writer with one foot in ink and the other in the spotlight, Mr. Levin looks on himself more as a theatrical type.

“My books are more theatrical than the other way around,” he said. “I think in terms of scenes rather than chapters. Critics have accused me of writing books with an eye to the movies. I’m really writing for the stage.”

With “Deathtrap” launched on Broadway, Mr. Levin is contemplating what to do next, a writer between the acts, or between the chapters. The idea will come.

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