

Mephisto Returns!

Fifties' period series a winner

Suspended Sentences

by Jim Napier

Postwar Britain, and Brighton, like the rest of the nation, is just beginning to return to normal. On the city's famous pier Magician Max Mephisto and his daughter Ruby French are headlining at the prestigious Hippodrome theatre. Collectively it's standard music-hall fare, including a magic act, a comedian, and in this case a variation on the obligatory line of chorus girls. "Living Tableaux" is a somewhat racy depiction of historical figures such as Cleopatra, Elizabeth I, and the Lady of Shalott by scantily-clad young women holding frozen poses to conform to the nation's obscenity laws.

But before long death stalks the theatre. In her rooming house the lifeless body of a young chorine is found, and tellingly, her corpse has been arranged in a contrived manner suggestive of a tableau.

DI Edgar Stephens, aided by Detective Sergeants Bob Willis and Emma Holmes, investigate the death. But aside from the victim's rather unusual vocation they can find nothing to suggest why she

should have been singled out for murder.



When the act's agent, Vic Cutler, is found dead Stephens zeroes in on the theatrical troupe. He is uneasy that his close friend Magician Max Mephisto is among the suspects. But even more disturbingly, his own fiancée, Ruby French—who is part of Max's act—cannot be eliminated from their enquiries.

Before long another woman is found strangled, and Stephens and his team are flummoxed: the victim was not part of act, yet her body too was arranged in a tableau.

Then the case takes on an added urgency. Yet another woman disappears, and Stephens is desperate to get to the bottom of things, as this time it is one of their own.

With more than a dozen novels and the CWA Dagger in the Library Award to her credit, Brighton-based Elly Griffiths is a seasoned crime writer. The latest in her

Magic Men series (earlier works include *The Zig Zag Girl*, *Smoke and Mirrors*, and *The Blood Card*), *The Vanishing Box* forms a nice counterpoint to her somewhat darker and contemporary Ruth Galloway series. The stories are cunningly contrived and take readers back to an era when, for most people, the worst was over; yet her tales remind us that even though the nation has returned to a peacetime setting, crime and violence are only a footstep away. One of her best.

Previously posted on *Reviewing the Evidence*, October 2018.

Jim Napier is a professional crime-fiction reviewer and novelist based in Canada. His book reviews and author interviews have been featured in several Canadian newspapers as well as on such websites as *Spinetingler Magazine*, *The Rap Sheet*, *January* magazine, *Reviewing the Evidence*, *Crime Time*, *Shots Magazine*, *the Montreal Review of Books*, and the *Ottawa Review of Books*. His reviews can also be found on *Amazon.com*, and *Goodreads*, as well as on his own award-winning site, <http://deadlydiversions.com>. His debut crime novel *Legacy* was published in the Spring of 2017, and the second in the series, *Ridley's War*, is scheduled for release in the Fall of 2018. He can be reached at jnapier@deadlydiversions.com