Hartland's RJ Crowley staging an 'old-school murder mystery' at Kendal in Hanover

By Aaron Rubin
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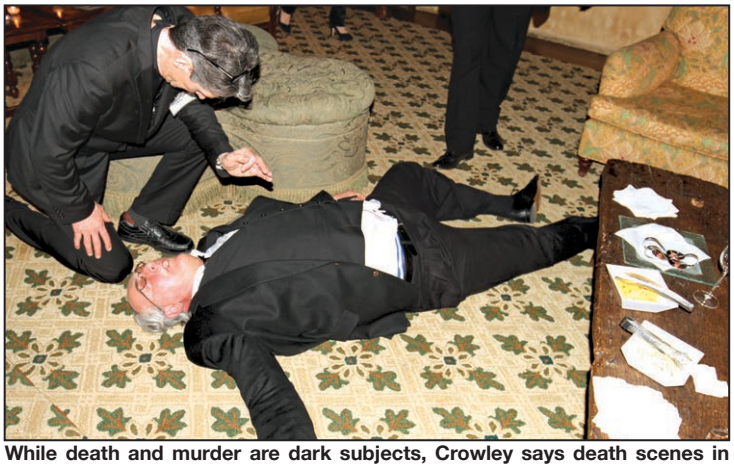
Hartland resident RJ Crowley is no stranger to the murder mystery genre. He has been involved in murder mysteries since his time as an actor in New York City, and it was that style of "immersive theater" in which he got his first acting jobs.

In the Upper Valley, he has staged performances at Twin Farms in Barnard, the David Sumner Mansion in Hartland, and aboard the Green Mountain Railroad. He is now bringing his murder mystery actors to the Kendal at Hanover retirement community on Saturday, Oct. 7.

Crowley said the production should be both a form of entertainment and recreation for the community's residents.

"I thought it would be just delightful to bring live theater to a group of people who are essentially living in a community of elderly people like themselves and I think somewhat starved for culture," said Crowley. "The other part of my thinking was, it would be really terrific if I could challenge this community of senior citizens, [have them] really try and figure out who the killer is, presenting them with a number of different clues."

The performance is designed specifically for only residents of Kendal, said Crowley, who writes his murder mysteries with the "idea of catering to the particulars of the client." Therefore, it's not coincident that this upcoming production centers around the "First Annual Senior Spelling Bee" at Kendal.



While death and murder are dark subjects, Crowley says death scenes in his productions can be quite comical, taking the edge off the difficulty of confronting mortality. Here, Crowley's character administers last rites to a dramatically-staged murder victim during an event at Twin Farms in Barnard.
Courtesy of RJ Crowley

Actors will blend in with the rest of the senior center in its auditorium, and then be called up to the stage to compete. But things will start to go wrong soon. "Five to ten minutes into the spelling bee somebody gets murdered, and then after that, another person gets murdered and the next thing you know all hell breaks loose," said Crowley.

As part of what Crowley describes as an "an old-school murder mystery," the death scenes will feature actors giving out clues to guests as they slowly pass and can last up to five minutes, giving them time to take note of those clues to lead them closer to the suspected killer.

As a result, guests will need to think quickly on their feet to solve the mystery, employing improvisation tactics just like the actors.

Finally, at the end of the event, guests will be able to interrogate the suspect as part of "the big reveal" of the perpetrator of multiple murders.

Crowley will be taking part in the production as well, with a character he developed decades ago in New York named Father Pat Flanigan, an Irish Catholic priest who happens to be a world-class detective. He recalls an anecdote about wearing his character and his craft literally on his sleeve, saying, "After a murder mystery at Twin Farms, I was driving home when I got a flat tire. Two young guys stopped to assist me. They basically changed my tire for me. Did all the work. And when I thanked them, they said: 'Anytime, Father.' It was then — and only then — that I realized I was still dressed as a priest."

Crowley says that the process of writing, casting, and rehearsing the productions can be time-consuming. A busy artist, he said that "booking murder mysteries is dependent upon what other creative endeavors I have going on at any time," which now includes being in rehearsal three times a week as the director for a theatrical performance of a play called "The Humans." The play will be featured by The Parish Players, and run from Oct. 26 through Nov. 12 at the Thetford Center.

Part of the enjoyment of murder mystery productions for Crowley is tied to the immersive experience of the production, where suspicion lurks all around and anybody could be the perpetrator.

"No one's ever really sure who's a guest and who's actually an actor playing a guest, which makes it a lot of fun because, therefore, everyone in the room is a suspect," said Crowley. "If you can imagine a live game of Clue, or any murder mystery written by anybody, especially like Agatha Christie…you just take those murder mysteries and you embed them into a live environment and create an interactive dynamic between the actors who are playing the suspects."

Along with the elements of mystery and suspense, Crowley said murder mystery productions can offer "a vicarious thrill for the audience members" but all within a safe environment. With its dark subject matter, it gives people an opportunity to explore a fascination with death and confront their own mortality — but always with a touch of humor.

"The murders themselves are almost comical in nature," said Crowley. "The death scenes beneath pieces of immersive theater that I do in these murders mysteries, they're always the most popular. People tend to be incredibly entertained because we're essentially poking fun at death, which I think can be very healthy."

With humor to take the edge off the specter of death, the experience should ultimately be a fun event with over-the-top characters, such as Flanigan, and comical occurrences with some of the region's best actors.

"There's a great deal of talent here in the Upper Valley," said Crowley. "There's a lot of people that I use in my murder mysteries — actors that are very, very talented."

To learn more about Crowley's work, visit rjcrowley-productions.com.



RJ Crowley, right, and Molly Shannon performing at their first murder mystery 35 years ago at the Sagamore Inn at Lake George, N.Y. Crowley has written and acted in murder mystery productions since the 1980s as a performer in New York City, and is a fan of the suspense and humor inherent in the genre.
Courtesy of RJ Crowley



While New York may be the home of Broadway, Crowley says he has found many very talented actors in the Upper Valley to cast in his productions. Pictured here are members of the cast of a previous year's murder mystery experience at Twin Farms in Barnard.
Courtesy of RJ Crowley



BRAD GILMAN
General Manager with over 40 years in the car dealership industry



BOB LEWIS
Brownsville resident with over 30 years of professional experience in the automotive and renewable energy industries



JIM FLANAGAN
Jim is a long time veteran of the Upper Valley car industry. He most recently was on staff at Gateway Motors for 11 years.