



Mystery Scene

[HOME](#)[ARTICLES](#)[REVIEWS](#)[BLOG](#)[SUBSCRIBE](#)[ADVERTISE](#)[ABOUT US](#)

Nero Wolfe: From Page to Stage

Written by Joseph Goodrich



Joseph Goodrich talks process for his new stage adaptation of *The Red Box*.

E. J. Subkoviak (Nero Wolfe) and Sam Pearson (Archie Goodwin). Photo: Petronella Ytsma.

My adaptation of *The Red Box*, the fourth

novel in Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe series, just had its world premiere at **Park Square Theatre** in St. Paul, Minnesota, this June. It marks the stage debut of Stout's corpulent, orchid-fancying crime solver and his irrepresible Man Friday, Archie Goodwin. Moving the inhabitants of a certain brownstone on West 35th Street from the page to the stage was a process that's taken, from first thought to lights-up, three and a half years.

The initial part of that process reminds me of the great lyricist Ira Gershwin, who was once asked, "Which comes first? The words or the music?"

Gershwin's answer: "The contract."

Before I set pen to paper, I needed permission from the Stout estate to dramatize one of the Wolfe stories. It turns out that Rex Stout's younger daughter Rebecca Bradbury manages the estate, so we were soon corresponding. Obtaining the dramatic rights took the better part of a year, and I understand why. It was not a small decision to make. Legal documents do not grow overnight. But they do grow, and eventually terms were agreed upon, and a contract was signed.

With the question of dramatic rights settled, another question presented itself: Which book to adapt?

I considered a number of titles before deciding on *The Red Box*. The novellas I'd contemplated using didn't have quite enough action for theatrical purposes, and many of the novels had too much. *The Red Box* struck me as having the right amount of plot and number of characters. I could trim and condense where necessary without fatally damaging the story. The fact that it was one of the lesser-known titles was also a strength; it would be unfamiliar to many, and perhaps even offer a few surprises to Wolfe aficionados. It's a strong early outing with Wolfe and Goodwin that possesses all the charm and zing we expect from them.

The Red Box. All right. How to—where to—begin?

I began by reading and re-reading the novel until the paperback threatened to fall apart. I must have read it a dozen times before I started writing. Certain aesthetic considerations shaped how I viewed the novel. *The Red Box* was first published in 1937, and it seemed appropriate to utilize the mainstream theatrical conventions of the era: one set, a limited number of characters engaged in recognizable, psychologically motivated behavior. The play should be compact, fast moving, intriguing—above all, it should be

Most Popular

Hotel Brasil: The Mystery of the Severed Heads

by Frei Betto

Syndrome E

by Franck Thilliez

Nero Wolfe: From Page to Stage

by Joseph Goodrich

Get the Latest



Follow us on...



entertaining.

Based on these choices, I decided that Wolfe's office in the brownstone would be the sole setting. I shortened the time frame from a week to three days to heighten the tension. I eliminated several smaller characters and simplified certain aspects of the plot. I moved the action of one scene from upstate New York to Brooklyn because Archie could get to Brooklyn faster.



Even with these alterations, I believe my adaptation is true to the spirit of the book and to the larger issues of character and relationships that animate the series. Archie Goodwin is the irresistible force. Nero Wolfe is the immovable object. Crime sets the conflict between the two in motion and lends gravity to their struggle—a struggle that's resolved by the solution of the crime. W.H. Auden once wrote: "When truly brothers, men don't sing in unison but in harmony." Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin meld their different personalities, their different gifts, and by doing so restore a kind of order. They harmonize beautifully.

The penultimate part of the process occurred last fall, when Park Square Theatre held a three-day, in-house workshop of the play. I heard it aloud for the first time; met the director and cast; and, most importantly, made revisions based on what I heard and saw. I made many small changes and cuts, added material here and there, fleshed out a character or two, straightened out a sentence. The play is sharper and clearer because of those three intense days, and clarity is essential for a mystery play.

The final part of the process began on May 30, when previews commence, and reaches another level on June 6, opening night. The play runs through July 13, 2014

It's hard to believe that three and a half years have elapsed since I asked myself, "Would it be possible to bring Nero Wolfe to the stage?" Luckily, the entire process has been, as Wolfe himself would say, "satisfactory." My hope is that all who have the chance to see the production in St. Paul will agree.

Joseph Goodrich is an author and dramatist whose plays have been produced across the United States. Panic received the 2008 Edgar Award for Best Play. He is the editor of Blood Relations: The Selected Letters of Ellery Queen, 1947-1950, which was nominated for Anthony and Agatha awards. He is an active member of Mystery Writers of America, an alumnus of New Dramatists, and a former Calderwood Fellow at the MacDowell Colony. He lives in New York City.

WIN TICKETS TO THE SHOW!

***The Red Box*, a Nero Wolfe mystery directed by Peter Moore and adapted for the stage from the writing of Rex Stout by Joseph Goodrich, runs from May 30 - July 13, 2014 at the **Park Square Theatre** in St. Paul, Minnesota.**



Send us an email by June 16, 2014, with your name and contact info **HERE** and be entered to win a pair of free tickets to the show in St. Paul, Minnesota! Bonus entry if you can name what magazine *The Red Box* was first serially published in when it appeared in 1936. See you at the theater!