

*The Wolfe Pack
The Nero Wolfe
Literary Society*

A NERO WOLFE MYSTERY

A Perfectionist Pursues the Perpetrators

The Reviews

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Holding court in "The Golden Spiders," which has its premiere tonight at 8 on A&E, Nero Wolfe manages to insult, assault, irritate, alienate and otherwise irk just about every other character in the story. He threatens to hold a well-bred society matron hostage until she truthfully reveals the information he demands. He enrages a high-ranking New York police officer by refusing to acknowledge a question until it is phrased in lucid, grammatically correct form. To the chagrin of his personal chef, he even sends an elaborately contrived dish back to the kitchen.

And what does the great detective have to say for himself?

"Pfui."

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Pfui, indeed. With an intellect -- not to mention an ego -- as gargantuan as he is, Wolfe need apologize to no one for his imperious manner. "Do you need to be told again that I am an artist?" he demands of Archie Goodwin (Timothy Hutton), his admiring but uncowed assistant.

has solved some of the most fiendishly difficult mysteries in genre literature -- for the most part, without setting foot outside his sumptuously furnished Manhattan brownstone on West 35th Street. Didact, polymath, artist, genius, the great man does not suffer fools gladly. He chews them up and spits them out on the Aubusson carpet.

"He has a mind like a deductive machine, which he accepts as his gift," says Maury Chaykin, the Canadian actor who stars in the role, "but which also makes him intolerant of ignorance and incompetence in others."

As a character actor (his extensive film credits include "The Sweet Hereafter" and "Devil in a Blue Dress"), Mr. Chaykin knows the value of the subtle but precise gesture -- a raised eyebrow, puckered lip or slow turn of the head -- that can convey this contempt for lesser mortals. But with Wolfe's encyclopedia of eccentricities, the acting challenges are infinite. "I understand the technique of eccentricity," the detective once said. "It would be futile for a man to labor at establishing a reputation for oddity if he were ready at the slightest provocation to revert to normal action."

Famously reclusive, he harbors phobic fears of mechanical conveyances, emotional women and poverty. Fastidious about his creature comforts, he indulges sophisticated tastes in food and drink (he is a beer connoisseur) and surrounds himself with beautiful things. If he has a pure passion, it is for the 10,000 rare orchids that he cultivates in his greenhouse and devotedly tends each day.

"The orchids have something to do with perfection," Mr. Chaykin says. "If you look at an orchid, there's something delicate and pristine and ultimately perfect about it. It represents serenity and clear thinking."

Like his creator, Rex Stout, who was a math prodigy by the age of 9 and had polished off his father's 1,126-volume library before he reached puberty, Nero Wolfe manifested his intellect (and Olympian arrogance) from the outset of his fictive life. "There is something in me that can help you," he tells a prospective client in his first case, "Fer-de-Lance" (1934). "It is genius, but you have not furnished the stimulant to arouse it."

The character's verbal dexterity is an actor's dream. "He rips people apart with his words," says Mr. Chaykin. "That's his punishment for their sloppiness of language, of thought."

Given Wolfe's girth (he weighs in at 285 pounds 11 ounces, or 1/7 of a ton), the towering rages of the great man can rattle the chandeliers. He bellows. He bullies. He (gasp) refuses to eat. There is a classic scene in "Gambit" (1962), in which he burns the pages of Webster's Third Edition to show his contempt for the lexicographers' lax standards. In "The Golden Spiders" (1953), he has to restrain himself from ejecting a visitor who uses "contact" as a verb.

Along with Wolfe's invincible intellect and refined sensibilities, this temper secures him an honored place among cranky geniuses like Edgar Allan Poe's C. Auguste Dupin, John Dickson Carr's Dr. Gideon Fell, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Colin Dexter's Inspector Morse. "Wolfe is easily aroused to anger, but most of the time he is very firm and completely controlled in the expression of it," says Mr. Chaykin. "He's like the angry father, who doesn't necessarily yell or scream when he is disciplining his child. He tends to grow cold and withhold emotion."