

Molle Mystery Theatre

1943 - 1952



Benard Lenrow played Geoffrey Barnes, connoisseur of crime.

"NBC's Mystery Theatre began airing with much fanfare on September 7, 1943. The series promised stories from the greatest classical and contemporary mystery authors--and production values to match. And it kept its promise. It was aided from the outset by the addition of an 'annotator'--as it was described in the 1940s--named Geoffrey Barnes. The annotator served in the role of expositor, filling in on the plot development as necessary and providing a back-story when needed. The apparent distinction made between a narrator and an annotator, was a matter of [degree](#). Mr. Barnes, a distinguished and celebrated amateur criminologist in his own right, was apparently on hand to help the listener analyze and understand the various mysteries and their underlying crimes within each script.

"The program appears to have aired sustained for its first three months, with three to five sponsors beginning to make an appearance with Program #17, The Mystery of The Seven Keys of December 28, 1943. There is a circulating program titled Homicide for Hannah, that should have been the first Mollé Mystery Theatre, but there is no provenance anywhere that the initial program ever actually aired. This is the first circulating program in which we hear the program refer to itself as Mollé Mystery Theatre. But throughout its NBC run, we hear [sponsorship](#) by Ironized Yeast, Energene, Bayer Aspirin, Sterling Drug, and Mollé.

"To its everlasting credit, NBC clearly went to great lengths to promote the script titles, performers and authors of each program to the nation's newspapers. From 1943 through 1948, Mystery Theatre was one of the most well documented and promoted radio programs of its time. Indeed, so many [details](#) were available for its entire NBC run that this was one of the easiest logs we've developed in some time. We have solid, highly detailed newspaper listing provenances for almost ninety percent of the first 237 programs.

"Sadly, the transition from NBC to CBS didn't fare as well for Mystery Theatre. NBC and CBS were waging a major war at the time, each network nakedly poaching the other's greatest Radio talent and programs, [wholesale](#). But judging from the way NBC and CBS--and Frank and Anne Hummert--promoted and supported their respective line-ups, it's clear that CBS was dropping the ball for the greater part of 1949. Frank and Anne Hummert were legendary talents in the area of producing and promoting melodrama. Indeed, an extraordinary number of the serial melodramas of the era were produced and developed by The Hummerts. But Mystery Theatre wasn't a melodrama genre--or format. That didn't stop the Hummerts from turning it into a melodrama under their watch. The franchise declined in popular and critical favor from that point forward.

"In all, Mystery Theatre in its various incarnations ran almost continuously from the Fall line-up of 1943 well into 1952--an impressive nine year run in its various guises. It ran four years over NBC, three years over CBS and two years over ABC. For NBC the program aired as either Mystery Theatre or Mollé Mystery Theatre. Over CBS, the program aired as [Frank and Anne Hummert's] Mystery Theatre and Hearthstone of The Death Squad. And finally, over ABC, the program aired as Inspector Mark Saber of The Homicide Squad or Mark Saber Mysteries.

"CBS and the Hummerts began rolling out spot ads and teaser articles about the Inspector Hearthstone programs in the Fall of 1949 but by the end of the 1951 run of Mystery Theatre the spot ads dwindled. Despite the more lackluster, melodramatic scripts, the Hummerts, relying on Alfred Shirley's celebrity and reputation, actively promoted the Inspector Hearthstone programming with their usual relentless and efficient skill--when it suited them. Apparently the reviewers of the era weren't very impressed by The Hummerts' scripts or cast (see Radio Review at left sidebar).

"Inspector Hearthstone of The Death Squad held some promise to breathe new life into the franchise with distinguished actor Alfred Shirley (of Sherlock Holmes fame) in the role of Inspector Hearthstone. Inspector Hearthstone was first introduced in February and March episodes of CBS's 1949 Mystery Theatre run. From 1949 to the Fall of 1951, Inspector Hearthstone of The Death Squad appeared in all but a few of the remaining Mystery Theatre programs, until CBS simply changed the production name to Inspector Hearthstone of The Death Squad on August 30, 1951.

"One can only surmise CBS' rationale for preserving the name Mystery Theatre while producing only Inspector Hearthstone programs for almost two years. It would seem as if Frank Hummert was more comfortable working with a single protagonist for his programs, hence his almost universal focus on Inspector Hearthstone of The Death Squad as the central figure in almost all of the CBS Mystery Theatre programs from 1948-1951. One of CBS Mystery Theatre's most redeeming elements--annotator Geoffrey Barnes--was eliminated with the solo Hearthstone of The Death Squad that followed. The Hummerts chose, instead, to go with a melodramatic intro to each program more reminiscent of Challenge of The Yukon or The Lone Ranger, than the CBS Mystery Theatre format of the previous two years. Indeed, by 1952, Hearthstone of the Death Squad was being heard virtually every day of the week--somewhere, usually in repeats. CBS had apparently abandoned any further promotion of the series. Throughout most of 1952, Hearthstone of the Death Squad was in total disarray. As it was, Inspector Hearthstone of The Death Squad finally left the airwaves December 31, 1952--for the most part in repeats in various small

outlets and at varying days and times.

"By the beginning of *Hearthstone of The Death Squad* in 1951, Television had already taken root. To further complicate the Radio and Television choices, a competing Mystery Theater from ABC aired on October 3, 1951 running in parallel with both CBS Mystery Theatre's *Hearthstone of The Death Squad* and ABC's Mystery Theater featuring Inspector Mark Saber of the Homicide Squad. If the intent was to confuse, both programs succeeded, and both came in for tepid reviews--at best. In addition there were parallel Television programs titled both Mystery Theater and Homicide Squad. It's apparent that Radio and Television programmers had finally taken off the gloves in earnest. In the final analysis, the Inspector *Hearthstone of The Death Squad* run from 1951-1952 appears to have been nothing more than thirteen or so original *Hearthstone* programs intermixed with a year's worth of repeats of CBS Mystery Theatre programs.

"There is no direct connection whatsoever between the lineage of the various NBC and CBS Mystery Theatre incarnations of Mystery Theatre and ABC's completely different and separate Mystery Theater; the network, sponsor, cast, technicians and recurring characters were all completely different. However, it may be useful to describe the essential details of ABC's Mystery Theater to dispel any lingering ambiguities as to its lineage.

"ABC Mystery Theater [not Theatre] ran from October 3, 1951 to July 1, 1953. Its initial run of 37 episodes starred Robert Carroll as Inspector Mark Saber. It broke for the Summer of 1953 on June 11, then resumed on October 8, 1952 with a different cast. Veteran Radio actor Les Damon became Inspector Mark Saber and Walter Burke became Saber's right hand, Sergeant Tim Maloney. Clearly positioning itself in direct competition with CBS' Inspector *Hearthstone of The Death Squad*, ABC's rendition of the genre was more grounded in American big city homicide. Its production values were somewhat better than the deteriorating scripts and engineering of *Hearthstone of The Death Squad*, but both series were somewhat lackluster compared to their Television competition. And neither series ever captured the superb writing, voice talent, engineering and production values of NBC's Mystery Theatre series." - [The Digital Deli Too](#).