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The Arts

The New York Times

It's Still a Hot Chase On a Very Cold Trail For a Hollywood Killer

By CARYN JAMES

"Dear Desperate Desmond," the actress Mabel Normand wrote to the silent-film director William Desmond Taylor. "Sorry I cannot dine with you tomorrow. But I have a previous engagement with a Hindoo Prince." She signed it "Blessed Baby."

After Taylor was murdered in 1922 — he was shot minutes after Normand walked out his door carrying a bag of peanuts and was driven away by her chauffeur — her love notes became known in newspapers as the Blessed Baby Letters. The Blessed Baby's career was soon a shambles, but that probably had more to do with her cocaine addiction than the Taylor scandal. One rumor had it that Normand's drug dealer was a peanut vendor. Who knows what she carried in or out of her lover's house that night?

What anyone knows about the still unsolved killing is much less than what people have been guessing for nearly 70 years. Was the murderer a seduced virgin, her jealous mother, the gay butler, the drug-addicted actress, the blackmailing secretary or someone from William Desmond Taylor's mysterious past?

Now, a film series, a book and a movie-in-the-works are feeding new speculation about the case, which seems more and more like a game of Clue.

8 Films on 3 Weekends

On Saturday, the American Museum of the Moving Image begins a series called Who Killed William Desmond Taylor?, which will run for three weekends, through June 3. The series features eight films directed by Taylor and four others starring Mabel Normand or Mary Miles Minter, the young actress who tried to displace Normand in Taylor's affec-

tion. Sidney D. Kirkpatrick's 1986 book, "A Cast of Killers." In novelistic style, Mr. Kirkpatrick retraced the steps of the director King Vidor as he investigated the case in 1967, planning to turn the mystery into a film.

Mr. Kirkpatrick agrees with Vidor's conclusion, that the killer was Charlotte Shelby, Minter's suffocating stage mother, who was jealous of the 49-year-old Taylor's attention to her 19-year-old daughter. Little did



The New York Times

Shelby know, according to this theory, that Taylor was not romantically involved with either Normand or Minter, because he was probably gay.

Paramount, Taylor's old studio, is now reworking a script Mr. Kirkpatrick wrote based on "A Cast of Killers." The director most often mentioned in connection with the film is



Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.



\$82.5 Million Disguises

By MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

Obscured by the sale Tuesday at Christie's in New York of lot No. 21 — Vincent van Gogh's "Portrait of Dr. Gachet," to a Japanese buyer for a record-breaking \$82.5 million — is what happened to the 80 other lots of Impressionist and modern art.

News Analysis Many of them sold around or below the low estimate given by the auction house, and 24 works went unsold. In fact, "Dr. Gachet" aside, the auction was the latest evidence of what is widely perceived to be a scaling back in the art market from the astronomical expectations of the last couple of years.

The retrenchment — which is probably a return to the way it used to be at auctions — was suggested by the handful of works by Pierre Auguste Renoir, including "Seated Female Nude," that went on sale. Bidding for the work reached \$550,000, well below the minimum estimate of \$900,000. The retrenchment was also suggested by such high-ticket items as a Piet Mondrian that was estimated to sell for \$12 million to \$16 million, and that brought \$8 million.

A record price was set for a painting by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (\$12.98 million), and a van Gogh self-portrait sold for \$26.4 million. But reportedly a number of works sold only because in the last few days owners agreed to lower their reserves, or minimums below which they would not sell.

Exception to the Rule

How, then, to account for the \$82.5 million paid for "Dr. Gachet"?

There is, of course, a measure of unreality about excesses of this kind. But the sale must be partly attributable to the fact that van Gogh has always been an exception to the rule, holding as he does a pre-eminent place in the popular imagination. No painter has been the subject of