

“YOU KNOW THE OLD SLAYING...”

A COMEDY IN TWO ACTS

By Michal Jacot

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P.O. BOX 248 • CEDAR RAPIDS, IOWA 52406
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“YOU KNOW THE OLD SLAYING . . . ”

By Michal Jacot

SYNOPSIS: A traveling theatre group gets ready to present their play, when one of their actors is murdered. The audience helps determine which one of the cast members is the culprit. At the end, the audience votes for who they think the murderer is; whoever gets the most votes is the confessed killer. The play is written with five different endings - the cast member who gets the votes goes into the ending tailored especially for him/her.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 MEN, 2 WOMEN)

MARK HENSHAW The male lead actor of the troupe. He is arrogant, conceited, and sarcastic. Fortunately for all of us, he is also the murder victim. *(41 lines)*

HARCOURT RODALE The director. A friendly, warm person towards everyone except Mark. Especially in his element when “working” an audience. He enjoys talking about the “magic of theatre,” and has been involved in it for most of his life. *(98 lines)*

LISA MCFARLAND The female lead actress. She is a former “big name” actress with a recognizable name and face, which the troupe uses to its advantage. She has a pleasant personality, but is headstrong, used to getting her own way - a prima donna past her prime. *(96 lines)*

DARLENE RICHARDS The young ingénue. Sweet and kooky; not stupid, but charmingly naive. *(59 lines)*

BRAD REESE..... The understudy for Henshaw. He is young, handsome, and enthusiastic about theater, though not as talented as he believes he is. (73 lines)

“FLASH” BURNS The stage manager. Taciturn and methodical; the strong silent type who anticipates a problem and corrects it without panicking. Polite enough, but not talkative. (77 lines)

SETTING

Your town’s local theater playhouse, high school stage, or community building.

TIME: Present.

PROPS

Placard on easel for “*You Know the Old Slaying . . .*” (preset on stage)
Styrofoam cup of coffee, the kind you’d get at a gourmet coffee shop
(backstage, brought out by DARLENE)
Two note pads (FLASH)
Two pencils (FLASH)
Pill bottle (backstage, brought out by HARCOURT)
Pills (loose in HARCOURT’s jacket pocket)
Small suitcases (backstage, brought out by MARK)
Dollar bill (FLASH. This is the dollar bill that is given out to an audience member each night. If you want to, the bill may be signed by FLASH BURNS [“Enjoy the show! From Flash Burns” or similar] that the audience member could keep as a souvenir.)

AUTHOR’S NOTES

“*You Know the Old Slaying . . .*” was written with low theatre budgets in mind. I wanted to see if I could write a play that would require virtually no set, no props, and no unusual costuming, sound or lighting requirements. It takes place in a theater playhouse (although it can be done anywhere some

floor space can be afforded). The set is purposely simple and vague. Light and sound needs are very basic. The cast is clothed in everyday clothes. It's made to be a play that could be potentially packed up in one vehicle and performed anywhere, on-the-spot.

“You Know the Old Slaying . . . ” is a murder mystery with five different possible endings - the ending the cast performs any particular night depends on the vote of the audience. Additionally, there are plenty of opportunities for ad-libs from the cast. The result is that a patron could attend multiple viewings of the show and never see the same show twice.

Before the play starts, your actors will mill about the crowd in character, mingling. They can introduce themselves to people, tell them their function in the production, make small talk, that sort of thing. They can always make comments about their relationships with the other characters if they wish; distasteful remarks about Mark Henshaw will help “prep” the audience for what's to come. But they should never give away key plot elements in a one-on-one conversation; save those for when everyone in the audience can hear what is being said.

The director and cast should feel free to change any city or town references to include their local area. Much of the fun for the audience will be catching these personalized references.

People generally aren't sure what to make of actors speaking to them until they get into the fun of it all. If you don't get the wanted audience response, you should be prepared with a backup plan. I don't recommend audience “plants,” because they often look set-up and, well, planted. But if you get an audience that just doesn't want to play, your actors should be ready with some ad-lib dialogue who would “remember” seeing something or who could prompt stubborn audiences to get the right answer. And always encourage the audience's participation. Thank them, sincerely compliment them on their insights and never belittle their responses. Above all, have fun with it!

PRODUCTION HISTORY

“You Know the Old Slaying . . . ” was first performed by the Tawas Bay Players of East Tawas, Michigan on August 10, 2000. It was directed by Debra Lee DeBois and featured the following cast:

Mark Henshaw	Chris Mundy
Harcourt Rodale	George Robson
Lisa McFarland.....	Renee Diener
Darlene Richards	Suzan Dunham
Brad Reese.....	Charlie Barr
“Flash” Burns	Susan Dowell *

* This is a male role, but was played by a woman in this production.

“You Know the Old Slaying . . . ” is dedicated to Debra, Chris, George, Renee, Suzan, Charlie and Sue. Thank you to you all.

ACT ONE

AT RISE:

The audience is seated. An easel is set up in the middle of the set with a placard reading "The On the Road Players, Featuring Lisa McFarland Present 'You Know the Old Slaying . . . '." The set dressing and furniture will look light, small, and cheesy; perhaps a ratty old chair and love seat, a coat rack in the corner. The impression we want to give the audience is that, when this group is done with their show, they will pack up all of this stuff in the back of a van and hit the road. Since the set doesn't have to be arranged in any particular way, feel free to do whatever arrangement suits your needs.

After the audience is settled in, the cast enters from the wings. FLASH takes the easel and sign and sets it off to the side. HARCOURT RODALE will take center stage and address the audience.

HARCOURT: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen! My name is Harcourt Rodale, and I am the director of tonight's little show. We hope you enjoy it. The show will begin in just a few minutes, so sit back and relax.

The show you're going to see is called "You Know the Old Slaying . . . ". We are the On the Road Players, a traveling theatre troupe. We have done this show for some time now, here in Michigan and in neighboring states. Next week, we'll pack up and move on to Saginaw. *(NOTE: In this and in any other pertinent dialogue, change the locations to suit your area.)* But for tonight, we hope to entertain you. I'd like to take a moment to introduce our crew. This is Darlene Richards, one of our fine young actresses. *(He politely signals the audience for light applause.)* This is "Flash" Burns, our stage manager. You won't see him on stage, but he'll be running everything smoothly behind the scenes. *(More applause. FLASH does a quick salute to the audience.)* Over here is Mark Henshaw, our lead role. *(More applause, which the other actors barely join in on.)* Next we - -

MARK: *(Steps in front of HARCOURT.)* Thank you, everyone, thank you! I'm sure you will all enjoy the show! *(He bows deeply, asking for more applause, and will wait until he gets it. Then he smugly steps back to let HARCOURT continue.)*

HARCOURT: Yes. Over here we have Brad Reese, a fine young actor, who is Mr. Henshaw's understudy. He won't be appearing in tonight's production but will be assisting Mr. Burns backstage, ready to go on if needed. And this wonderful woman, I'm sure, needs no introduction. She has appeared on Broadway, she was nominated for an Oscar for her performance in "The After Dinner Engagement," and has been seen in numerous guest appearances on television. Ladies and gentlemen, the star of our show - -

MARK: - - The female star of our show . . .

HARCOURT: (*Presses on.*) The lovely Miss Lisa McFarland. (*Applause.*) It is customary for our theatre troupe to mingle with the audience before the show begins, so feel free to talk with them. Curtain rises in just a few minutes!

HARCOURT and everyone else step out into the audience, making small talk while in character. They should not give away any major plot details; simply use this time to show some audience members their true personality. This will go on for about four or five minutes, then MARK will make his way back up to the stage area and deliver his next line. The others may stay out in the audience area or gradually wander back up to the stage, as they see fit.

MARK: God, the acoustics in this place! How are we supposed to get into character when every word we speak will be bouncing off the walls back at us? (*Imitating an echo.*) And now, ladies and gentlemen, men, men, men - - !

HARCOURT: (*Nervously, to audience*) He always likes to joke around like that. (*To MARK.*) Mark, this is their local theater. Try to be nice.

MARK: I am being nice. Hey, I'm a nice guy. I can't help it if this theater is a little actor-unfriendly. Come on, look at this dump! (*To audience.*) What's the matter, you people couldn't afford a real theater? But then, you've got a dozen bars in this town, I can see where your priorities are.

HARCOURT: Mark, that is enough! I will not have you insulting our audiences like that!

MARK: You don't like it? Then fire me.

HARCOURT: (*Embarrassed.*) Mark, I don't see any need for this sort of display in front of - -

MARK: Come on, Harcourt, old buddy! Fire me! The answer to your problems. Fire me. Right now. *(He gets into HARCOURT's face, intimidating and cocky.)* Come on, Harcourt. If you're so tired of me, why don't you just exercise your prerogative as director and kick me out? You've got little Bradley here as an understudy, it's not like you'd need to cancel the show. *(HARCOURT is silent, but is obviously fuming.)* Oh, wait. Of course. You wouldn't fire me because you know I'm the only actor you've got who can do this part. Because I'm the best actor you've got. Isn't that it, Harcourt? Because you know this whole thing would go down the toilet with Brad in the lead.

BRAD: Hey!

MARK: Or maybe it's just a matter of guts. Is that it, Harcourt? Lack of intestinal fortitude? Hm? A little weak in the spine? *(A pause.)* I guess that's it. I don't hear you complaining about me any more. Now that we know where we stand, why don't you keep up the silence. It looks good on you. *(HARCOURT walks away from him, furious.)* And has everybody forgotten what time it is? *(Everyone looks at each other, puzzled.)* It's fifteen minutes before show time.

FLASH: He wants his drink.

LISA: Oh, of course. Mister Stage Presence must have his drink before going on.

MARK: *(To audience.)* I always have my customary caramel vanilla mocha cappuccino with *(He does an exaggerated "pinch" gesture.)* just a *pinch* of cinnamon fifteen minutes before going on. It relaxes me, soothes my vocal chords, and always ensures another perfect performance. *(Laughs.)* Maybe you should be trying it, Lisa. If you had, maybe your career wouldn't have ended up in the dumpster! *(LISA is hurt, but tries not to show it in front of MARK.)* So come on! I left it backstage. Time is flying! Stage manager . . .

FLASH: Pipe down, I'll go get your coffee.

MARK: It's not coffee. It's -

FLASH: I know, I know . . .

Everyone in cast joins in to say it simultaneously; they've heard this one a million times.

ALL (EXCEPT MARK): A caramel vanilla mocha cappuccino with *(They all mimic his gesture.)* just a pinch of cinnamon!

MARK: Very good! Who says you're all untrained? Now move!

FLASH exits back stage. DARLENE follows him out.

HARCOURT: *(Nervously, to the audience.)* You, uh, you know how actors are. They all have their little traditions and good-luck rituals.

BRAD: *(Trying in vain to stand up to MARK.)* You know, Mark, Flash isn't your butler. None of us are. Why can't you just get your drink yourself?

MARK: Why don't you tell everyone why you got kicked out of college? Maybe some of these people didn't read the newspaper that day. *(BRAD, embarrassed, retreats.)*

LISA: Brad's right, Mark. Get your own drink for a change.

HARCOURT: Could we please not do this in front of . . . ? *(Indicates the audience.)*

LISA: You're right.

BRAD: Fine.

MARK: Fine with me.

DARLENE returns with the drink and gives it to MARK. HARCOURT then leaves the stage.

MARK: There now, you see? I'm not bossing our stage manager around. Because lovely Darlene here was nice enough to bring my drink for me! *(He sets it aside, and reaches over and pinches DARLENE'S rear end.)* Thanks, sweetcakes!

DARLENE yelps, and moves away, embarrassed. During the next bit of dialogue, HARCOURT returns to the stage. He slyly takes the drink, takes a small pill bottle from his pocket, and drops something into the cup. He sets the drink back in its place. All of this goes unobserved by the cast, although sharp-eyed audience members will see his actions.

DARLENE: Don't do that!

MARK: Ooooh! That's good! Pretend you don't want it. I figured with your husband out of the picture you might be getting a little . . . anxious.

DARLENE: Don't you ever talk about my husband!

BRAD: Hey, that's over the line even for you, Mark. *(To audience.)* Darlene's husband was killed in an automobile accident a while back.

MARK: Hey, it's been a while since Darlene had any regular . . . *(He looks at her lewdly.)* . . . cappuccino. I was just volunteering to quench her thirst, you know? *(DARLENE slaps him, then turns away from the audience, sobbing.)* Whoa, that's going to leave a mark.

BRAD: That was really uncalled for.

MARK: Tell me about it. She slapped me pretty hard.

BRAD: I mean what you said to her. How can you be that cruel?

MARK: I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam.

DARLENE: *(Apologetically, to audience.)* Sometimes Mark gets a little . . . frisky. Don't pay any attention to him.

LISA: It's not like he hasn't had his hands on you before, is it, Darlene?

MARK: Oooh! Catfight!

LISA: Shut up!!!

DARLENE: Why do we always have to fight each other?

MARK: *(To audience.)* Everybody! *(Sings.)* Why can't we be friends, why can't we be friends . . . *(He leers at an attractive woman in the audience.)* How about you, honey? Want to be my friend?

LISA makes a disgusted sound and walks away. She looks surreptitiously at the others, then walks offstage with MARK's drink. Again, no one in the cast will notice this, but it will be visible to the audience, if they are watching. As she leaves, FLASH returns to stage.

HARCOURT: *(Nervously, to audience.)* We, ah, love to kid around like this in front of the audience before the show. Consider it as . . . part of the fun of theater. *(He clears his throat, trying to think of what else to say.)* Ah. Well . . .

BRAD: *(Trying to help.)* Maybe you could tell the audience about our performances last week in Alpena.

HARCOURT: (*Grateful for the "save."*) Yes! I could! Thank you, Bradley! (*During his dialogue, LISA returns to stage without drink.*) Well, we just had a wonderful time in Alpena. Audiences were very receptive to the show. They really enjoyed "Slaying," as I'm sure you will, too. We had one fellow who said he had to decide between seeing our performance and watching his favorite television program. And he said he was glad he came to see us, not only because he enjoyed the show so much, but because he could always catch his program on the rerun. (*HARCOURT waits for the uproarious laughter he thinks he will get from this story. Getting none, he shifts uncomfortably, then checks his watch.*) Well

. . .

FLASH: Two minutes, Chief.

HARCOURT: Two minutes 'til show time! Well, I'm sure you all are eager for us to get started, so if our actors will take their places backstage, we'll - -

MARK: Hey! Where did my drink go? It was just here!!

FLASH: What are you talking about?

MARK: My caramel vanilla mocha cappuccino.

FLASH: (*Deadpan.*) You mean the one with (*Gestures.*) just a pinch of cinnamon?

DARLENE: It was here a minute ago.

MARK: Well, it's not here now!

LISA: Will you calm down? I took your coffee cup backstage.

MARK: Why?

LISA: It's not supposed to be on the set, you fool! Keep your personal belongings backstage!

MARK: Well, aren't we high-and-mighty today? Well, I've got news for you all. (*He sits.*) I always have my drink before I go on. No drink, no show.

BRAD: I could do his part! Let me! (*MARK glares at him.*) I mean . . . I am the understudy. I could do it. I've practiced it . . . if you didn't want to . . .

HARCOURT: (*Trying to goad MARK.*) That's not a bad idea. We could have Brad understudy tonight . . .

MARK: Don't even go there. (*To BRAD.*) I have a better idea, Bradley-boy. Instead of you doing my part tonight, and disappointing all of these good people with your performance, you could make yourself useful and trot your little butt backstage and get me my drink!!

BRAD: *(Stares at him for a moment, furious; then:)* Fine. *(He stomps out into the audience and grabs someone's coffee cup. [You will want to have a cup planted somewhere before the show as a backup in case BRAD can't find anyone with a drink.] He returns to stage with cup.)* Here. Now can we get on with the show?

MARK: *(Smiles.)* Brad, let me clue you in. When people want a stellar performance, they look for Mark Henshaw. If they want to settle for something less, they look for . . . well, you. In a similar vein, when I want a good drink, I have my caramel vanilla mocha cappuccino with just a pinch of cinnamon. If I want to settle for something less, I have . . . *(Examines the drink given him with a look of disgust.)* this . . . *(Asks audience member it was taken from.)* . . . what is this, anyway? *(After hearing answer.)* Ah. Well, I guess that's the level of class I should expect from this town. *(Hands drink back to BRAD.)* Here. Give this back to that poor unfortunate soul and get me a real drink. My drink. *(BRAD glares at him, fuming.)* Today, please.

BRAD: You want your drink? You'll get it. In fact, I think you'll get everything you deserve. *(He exits.)*

MARK: What was that supposed to mean?

LISA: Oh, you know young Bradley. Empty threats, and never serious about them.

DARLENE: Brad's a sweet guy. You really should be nicer to him.

MARK: Hey, I'm a nice guy. I'm an absolute peach.

FLASH: More like a son of a peach. *(MARK glares at him.)* Just a joke.

MARK: I'm nice to those who are nice to me. *(Directing this next bit to FLASH.)* And if some people can't get over the past, that's their problem. *(FLASH looks at MARK, but his face shows no emotion. BRAD returns with MARK's drink.)* Thank you, Bradley-boy. Now that wasn't so hard, was it?

BRAD: I just did it so we could get the show moving.

MARK: *(To audience.)* If only he could act as well as he can “go-fer.”

BRAD: *(Angry.)* Hey, I'm just as good an actor as you are! Better, maybe! *(MARK watches this outburst with amusement.)* If I just had the chance, I'd do your part and show everybody how good I am! You just give me the chance some time! Why don't you just get sick or go get hit by a bus or something - -

LISA: Bradley!!

BRAD: - - And I'll step in and do that part and show everyone!

There is a long, shocked pause. After a moment, MARK slowly, deliberately claps his hands.

MARK: Bravo, Bradley-boy. The performance of your career. (*BRAD, embarrassed at his outburst, turns away.*) What emotion! What angst! What motivation! Probably your best work yet. It's a crying shame your stage career just peaked with that little tantrum. It's all downhill from here.

FLASH: (*Tapping his watch.*) Harcourt, it's show-time.

HARCOURT: Cast and crew backstage, please!

MARK: Do I look like I'm finished with my drink? (*He sips his drink.*)

HARCOURT: (*Obviously embarrassed by MARK's behavior.*) Mark, please - - !

DARLENE: (*To HARCOURT.*) We should start on time. (*To audience.*) We should start on time. We just . . . it will be another minute or so.

LISA: Harcourt, are we just going to stand around here waiting while this egomaniac finishes his stupid drink? Do something!

MARK: When I'm done, we will begin. Not when he (*Indicates HARCOURT.*) says so. Not when he (*Indicates FLASH.*) says so, and not when Miss Used-To-Be-Somebody (*Indicates LISA.*) says so. It . . . (*He takes a long, leisurely sip*) . . . will be . . . (*Another sip, taking his time*) . . . when I say so.

There is a long, uncomfortable pause as the actors look at each other waiting, while MARK silently sips his drink. Finally, he smugly smiles at the cast.

FLASH: All better now?

MARK: Yes, thank you. (*Addresses audience.*) Now, ladies and gentlemen, sit back and relax while the On the Road Players proudly present for your enjoyment, "You Know The Old Slaying . . ." Featuring Mark Henshaw and a cast of others. (*He bows to the audience.*)

HARCOURT: Places, please. (*HARCOURT walks to the back of the house; everyone else exits backstage. Just before he exits, MARK looks at the coffee cup in his hand, smiles, and deliberately sets it on stage in full view.*)

MARK: (*Mocking LISA.*) "Keep your personal belongings backstage." Maybe her acting needs all the help it can get. Mine doesn't. (*He exits.*)

Some kind of ominous sounding theme music could play for a few seconds to indicate the beginning of the play. After a moment, DARLENE and MARK enter, playing their roles of flighty, superficial jetsetters. It is important that your actors play these roles very differently from their regular ones so that the audience will get the idea that this is a play within the play.

DARLENE: *(In character.)* "Darling, finally! I thought we'd never arrive here!"

MARK: *(In character.)* "Well, who would have dreamed the old coot of a taxi driver would get lost on the way here? He told us he knew where Uncle Elliot's home was."

DARLENE: *(In character.)* "I wonder why Uncle Elliot called us here? It's not as though we've been terribly close to him."

MARK: *(In character.)* "Oh, Cybil, who knows? I never cared for Uncle Elliot when I was a child, why should I - - "

LISA enters, in the character of an enigmatic, sophisticated woman.

DARLENE: *(In character. Noticing LISA's entrance.)* "Shh!"

LISA: *(In character.)* "Good evening. You must be Cybil and Don Banner."

MARK: *(In character.)* "Why, yes we are! And who - - " *(He pauses momentarily, frowning as he puts his hand on his chest, then continues.)* "And who the devil are you?"

DARLENE: *(In character.)* "Why, darling, it's obvious she's the housekeeper."

LISA: *(In character.)* "You should be careful of what you assume, Mrs. Banner. I am Loretta Grace Downing . . . "

MARK: *(In character.)* "Downing!?!"

LISA: *(In character.)* "And I am your uncle Elliot's new wife. Obviously he never mentioned me."

MARK: *(In character.)* "His new wife? Why, that's preposterous! He - - he - - " *(MARK stops momentarily as he clutches his chest and grimaces in pain. LISA and DARLENE look at him, puzzled.)* "He vowed never to get married again after Aunt Bonnie passed away! He never said a thing to anyone in my fam . . . family . . . *(Again, he stops, in great pain, his breathing labored.)* He never . . . he never said a thing . . . "

DARLENE: Mark, are you all right?

MARK: Keep going. (*In character.*) "And given the fact that Uncle Elliot's estate is worth millions, surely someone would have - - " (*He convulses and clutches his throat.*) Gaaah - - ! (*He collapses.*)

There is general ad-libs of pandemonium. HARCOURT rushes back up to the stage. FLASH enters.

FLASH: What happened?

DARLENE: I don't know.

BRAD enters while FLASH checks MARK.

BRAD: What's going on?

DARLENE: I don't know.

LISA: He just collapsed.

HARCOURT: How is he, Flash? Can you tell us anything? (*To the audience.*) I apologize for the interruption of our show, ladies and gentlemen. I - - uh - - that is, I - - (*He doesn't know what to say and gives up.*)

FLASH: (*Checks MARK's pulse.*) He's dead. (*Ad libs of disbelief from the cast.*)

HARCOURT: (*To audience.*) Ladies and gentlemen, I - - I don't know what to say. This is terrible. It seems we, ah, have had a medical emergency here. If you would all remain calm, we will, ah . . . (*Looks around to the cast, seeking their approval.*) continue with the show . . . ?

DARLENE: We're really going to do the show anyway?

LISA: Harcourt, he's dead!

BRAD: I'm the understudy! I could do it!

LISA: Don't be so eager, Brad! It's not like he's got laryngitis.

BRAD: I didn't mean . . . you know. Did he have a heart attack?

LISA: Mark Henshaw? He had a heart like a twenty-year-old. That's what his doctor told him at his last checkup, and that was just last month.

FLASH: That's right. He's been bragging about his clean bill of health ever since. (*He picks up MARK's coffee cup and examines it.*)

HARCOURT: Ladies and gentlemen, I'm very sorry, but under the circumstances, it looks as though we'll have to cancel our performance tonight. We hope that we can try again another day. The exits are plainly marked, if you will all file out in an orderly manner.

FLASH: Wait a minute. Nobody leave.

HARCOURT: What is it?

FLASH: There was something in his drink. You can see the residue. Some kind of powder. *(He swipes the cup with a finger and sniffs it.)*

LISA: Powder? What are you talking about?

DARLENE: Is it the pinch of cinnamon? *(LISA glares at her.)* What?

FLASH: Look for yourself. *(They look closely at the cup, then at each other.)* He was poisoned.

Ad libs: “Poisoned?” “What?” “Are you serious?” etc.

FLASH: He was poisoned. And I think I know what was used. Hang on. *(He exits.)*

HARCOURT: *(To audience.)* Ladies and gentlemen, under these new circumstances, I'm afraid I must ask all of you to remain here. It appears there has been some foul play and until we get it cleared up, no one is allowed to leave the building. *(FLASH returns to stage carrying a plastic canister.)* What have you got there?

FLASH: It was backstage. A canister full of strychnine.

LISA: What on earth would strychnine be doing backstage? Was it with our stuff?

FLASH: It's a common rat poison. I always pack it when we're on the road. You know how Darlene is with rats and mice.

DARLENE: *(Shivers.)* Ewww! I hate those nasty things!

FLASH: A lot of these old buildings have rodents. I keep some of this in case I have to do a little exterminating before the show. Anticipate problems before they happen. That's my motto.

BRAD: You're saying somebody spiked his drink with strychnine?

FLASH: Well, this was a brand new jar. I hadn't opened it yet. But look at it. The tamper-proof seal is broken, and there's some missing out of the jar.

HARCOURT: Flash, when did you buy that strychnine?

FLASH: Just today. At that hardware store downtown. *(FLASH can name a local hardware store or any local store that would sell rat poison. [If he names a specific store, though, make sure he knows their hours of business for that day - the audience may ask!])* And when I went backstage to get Mark's drink, I noticed it was still sealed.

BRAD: But nobody is allowed back there except us!

There is a long pause while they all look at each other.

DARLENE: (*Points into audience.*) Maybe it was one of them!

HARCOURT: Calm down, Darlene. None of these fine people were ever backstage. Eh . . . were you . . . ?

LISA: Harcourt, do you know what this means? It means . . . one of us . . . !

DARLENE: No, that's not possible! Why would any of us kill Mark?

There are a few uneasy glances among the actors.

DARLENE: Oh. Well . . . I know that Mark wasn't the most well-liked person in our group, and he had a few flaws, but that's not enough to kill anyone. Is it?

HARCOURT: True, Mark Henshaw did have his . . . personality quirks.

FLASH: Come on, Chief! The guy's dead! You don't have to pretend he's special any more.

LISA: Look, I've never been involved in an actual murder, but I've seen a lot of them on stage and on screen. They always try to recreate the events that led up to the . . . the incident. Why don't we try that? Maybe we'll figure something out.

FLASH: Good idea.

BRAD: Let's try it.

LISA: Before we do anything else, couldn't someone, er . . . give the star of our show his final curtain call?

DARLENE, misunderstanding LISA, applauds for a moment. When she notices everyone looking at her . . .

DARLENE: What?

LISA: You know, escort him off into the wings?

FLASH: What?

LISA: Get this dead body off the stage!!

HARCOURT: Oh, of course!

LISA: I was trying to be euphemistic.

HARCOURT: Er, Flash, Bradley, would you please . . . ? (*FLASH and BRADLEY pick up MARK and carry him offstage.*) And while you're back there, please call the police. (*To audience.*) I'm terribly sorry that this had to happen, and I regret that all of you are forced to stay here until we solve this. But while we're waiting for the police to arrive, perhaps you can be of assistance. (*FLASH and BRADLEY return to the stage during this dialogue.*) We'll run through the events preceding Mark's death. We'll try to stay as closely as possible with what really happened. If any of you notice anything that doesn't jibe with the actual events, please feel free to correct us.

FLASH: Where do you want to start, Chief?

HARCOURT: The most reasonable time is about when Mark Henshaw asked for his ritual drink. It was some time after that that the poison was opened. Let's see, help me remember . . . he didn't go get his own drink.

LISA: He never did. It was more fun to have people wait on him hand and foot.

HARCOURT: (*To audience.*) Which one of our group took Mr. Henshaw's drink order? Anyone remember? (*Someone will say "FLASH."*) Oh yes, that's right, it was Flash Burns, our stage manager.

FLASH: You don't see me denying it.

HARCOURT: No, we don't. But you must admit, it puts you in a rather ticklish situation. You were alone backstage fixing his drink.

FLASH: And I could have put the poison in it. Right. (*Holds out hands as though waiting to be handcuffed.*) Take me away, Commissioner Gordon. The evidence is overwhelming.

LISA: Oh, quit kidding around. He's just saying nobody saw you backstage.

FLASH: I know what he's saying. How 'bout it, Harcourt? You think I killed Henshaw for the wheelbarrow full of money he was making in traveling theater?

HARCOURT: You are all paid sufficiently from our box office receipts. (*They all laugh.*)

LISA: Oh, Harcourt, let's not delve into science fiction!

HARCOURT: Well, I know it's not a great deal of money, but . . . well, people have been killed for a lot less.

DARLENE: I remember hearing about a big theater company in New Hampshire a few years back. One of their crew members disappeared with nearly two hundred thousand dollars in cash receipts.

LISA: That's right, I heard about that. I don't think this company has to worry about that kind of money.

HARCOURT: (*Irritably.*) Could we get back to the subject at hand, please?

LISA: Calm down, dear. We were just talking.

HARCOURT: We were talking about Flash's placement in the - - activities - - of the evening. He was alone backstage, correct? (*Someone in audience will say "No."*) He wasn't? Who else was back there? (*Audience: "DARLENE."*) Darlene?

BRAD: That's right, I saw her follow Flash out. I'm sorry, Darlene. I don't mean anything by that. I just want to make sure we get everything right.

DARLENE: That's all right.

LISA: So why did you go backstage?

DARLENE: It was nothing. I was just . . . I just wanted to make sure Flash was all right. Mark was so mean to him, and Flash is always so quiet and never seems to show his emotions. I was afraid he was keeping it all bottled up inside him. So I followed him to make sure he was all right, that's all.

LISA: Glad to see the two of you are so comfy-cozy.

DARLENE: Flash is a friend of mine!

LISA: I saw the two of you in Alpena last week, in that abandoned office room. You really should learn to lock the door behind you.

DARLENE: Oh! We didn't . . . we didn't see you there.

LISA: You were extremely preoccupied.

HARCOURT: Let's get back to the matter at hand. (*To audience.*) All right, so we've established that Flash was sent backstage to get Mark's drink, and Darlene followed him back there. Then we can assume Flash returned with the drink, is that right? (*Audience: "No, DARLENE did."*) Darlene did? (*He looks questioningly at DARLENE.*)

DARLENE: I told you, he didn't show it, but Flash was upset with Mark's ordering him around. I told him, "Don't worry about it. Why don't you just stay back stage for a while . . . you know, cool off a little." I told him not to worry about Mark's drink, I'd bring it out for him. That's all.

BRAD: That's right. She brought it out. That was when that lecher pinched her bu - - pinched her.

HARCOURT: And there his drink sat. I don't recall anyone touching it in that time. (*Audience will disagree.*) What are you talking about? Who touched his drink? (*Audience: “You did, HARCOURT.” Indignantly:*) Me?! I never touched his drink! (*Audience will remind him of earlier business with MARK's drink.*) Oh. That.

BRAD: You did something to his drink?

LISA: Harcourt, what is all this about?

HARCOURT: I'd . . . rather not discuss it right now.

FLASH: I think this is the perfect time to discuss it.

LISA: Harcourt?

HARCOURT: It's nothing. It was just . . . I feel like a fool now. Yes, I spiked Henshaw's coffee. I spiked it with a sleeping pill.

LISA: A sleeping pill?

HARCOURT: Not enough to do any harm. I just wanted him to get a little sleepy, a little doopey. Just enough to where his edge would rub off and he'd start slipping on his lines.

DARLENE: Why would you want to do that?

HARCOURT: It was a practical joke, for heaven's sake! The man was an egomaniac. He constantly bragged about how great he was. The worst part of it was, he really was good up there. That's what made him so insufferable. He put no effort into it at all, it just came to him naturally. I just wanted to see one night, one night where he had to work for his performance. Maybe not be as great as he thought he was. Humble him a little. Every one of you will agree he needed it.

FLASH: (*Laughs.*) So you were purposely trying to make Henshaw screw up his performance just to make him look bad?

HARCOURT: Yes. It all sounds so stupid and petty now, especially in the light of his death. But that's all I was doing, I swear it. But, to recreate the events, I went backstage and retrieved my bottle of sleeping pills. I came back on. I picked up his coffee cup and dropped a sleeping pill into it, then I put it back down here. And there it sat until he drank it and died. Correct? (*Audience: “No, LISA took it.”*) Lisa, they're saying they saw you do something to Mark's drink!

LISA: (*Glaring at audience.*) Liars.

DARLENE: That's right. I remember her going off with it, because Flash came back out just as she was leaving.

LISA: All right, all right! Look, I already told you all what that was all about. His drink was on stage. It was not supposed to be on stage. Therefore, I took the liberty of moving it off stage since the jackal who was drinking it had no intention of moving it himself.

DARLENE: Where did you take it?

LISA: I just set it backstage. Look, I've been in theater for a long time. A little thing like a coffee cup that's not supposed to be onstage is very distracting to the audience. You have to maintain the illusion in every little detail. Especially in the little details.

BRAD: But . . . what did you do to it when you took it backstage?

LISA: Sweet little Bradley. I know you're just looking for the truth. But the fact of the matter is, I took his drink backstage, set it on a table, and left it. I did not put rat poison in it, I did not spike it with a sleeping pill or arsenic or ground glass or anything. I simply set it down and went about my business as an actress. And that was when someone went backstage and retrieved it for him. Who? (*Audience: "BRAD."*) Oh yes, Bradley!

BRAD: Well . . . he wanted his drink.

LISA: But Bradley, in your search for the truth, you've uncovered an unsettling detail. The fact that you were the last one to handle Mark's drink before he died.

BRAD: All I did was go get his drink! Honest! I didn't do anything to it! I was just trying to be helpful!

HARCOURT: Even to Mark Henshaw?

BRAD: Well . . . yes. So?

HARCOURT: You weren't exactly the best of friends with him, Brad. He took great delight in needling you at every opportunity.

BRAD: Well, yes, but . . . He just liked to tease, that's all.

FLASH: And were you teasing when you threatened him?

BRAD: Threatened him? What are you talking about? I never - -

FLASH: I believe it was something like "You'll get everything you deserve." What was that all about?

BRAD: Oh. That.

LISA: Yes, Bradley dear, what did you mean by that?

BRAD: It was nothing. Just . . . something to say to him. He made me angry, I wanted to say something that sounded . . . smart. Tough. (*Admits it reluctantly.*) Threatening. I just meant that some day, somewhere, all of his nasty remarks would come back to him. I didn't mean anything specific.

DARLENE: Poor Brad. He wouldn't hurt a fly, you all know that.

LISA: And of course, neither would you, Darlene. Right?

DARLENE: Well . . . no. I wouldn't kill Mark Henshaw, if that's what you mean.

FLASH: Look, we all say things we don't intend on backing up. For crying out loud, look at Mark. He told me that he got away with murder once. Literally. Said he did away with some guy, made it look like an accident, and there was no way to trace him to it.

LISA: Don't you think he was pulling your leg?

FLASH: Oh, I didn't believe him. I don't think it was so much a joke as it was a line he told me hoping I'd buy into his “dangerous guy” act. He was a windbag.

HARCOURT: Before we get too far off track, let's recap. Everyone, please, let's walk through the chain of events and see if something comes up. First, Mark asked Flash to go get his drink. Flash . . . ? *(He signals FLASH to go offstage. FLASH, with a sigh of disgust, gets up and leaves, muttering under his breath all the way.)* Then Darlene, you followed him off. *(DARLENE starts to leave, then turns back to audience.)*

DARLENE: I didn't do it. Really. *(She leaves.)*

HARCOURT: A couple of minutes passed, then Darlene returned with Mark's drink and gave it to him. *(DARLENE returns holding an imaginary cup. She mimes handing the cup to “Mark.”)*

LISA: That, according to *(Indicates audience,)* our observers here, is when you did your deviousness with the drink.

HARCOURT: Uh . . . yes. Just a sleeping pill, a harmless pill. I went off for a moment, came back on, and, uh . . . *(He mimes taking the drink, dropping something in it, and setting it back down.)* That was when Lisa took the drink and exited off stage. *(He waits for LISA to do so. At first, she refuses to move; then, rolling her eyes, and with great theatrical flair, she picks up the imaginary drink and walks upstage to back wall, where she stands, arms folded.)* At about the time she was leaving, Flash came back in. *(FLASH does so.)* Then Mark asked for his drink --

LISA: Mark screamed for his drink. And I told him what I did with it.

HARCOURT: -- And Brad went backstage to get it. *(BRAD, eager to play the part, starts offstage. Before he gets completely off . . .)* Then he came back out shortly after, with the drink in question.

BRAD: Wait a minute. I wasn't off yet.

HARCOURT: What?

BRAD: I wasn't off. You said I went off, then came back on. I didn't have a chance to go all the way off.

LISA: It's a re-enactment, Bradley. We all know what you did.

BRAD: But don't you think I should --

HARCOURT: Just come and sit down, Brad. (*BRAD, disappointed, sits down. To audience.*) I think we can all agree that is basically how it went? (*There should be general approval from the audience. Some lost soul may offer something new, but use your judgment. Dismiss useless clues from the audience politely; never make anyone look foolish, no matter what they offer. Say something like, "That's very interesting. That may or may not figure in with tonight's events, but that's very observant of you to bring it up."*)

FLASH: Looks to me like all of us had a chance to mess with Henshaw's drink.

HARCOURT: Well, yes, but just because I played a little joke doesn't make me guilty of murder.

FLASH: That could have just as easily been strychnine you dropped in his drink.

HARCOURT: (*Defensively.*) And what about you? You were all alone backstage when you were preparing his drink!

LISA: That's right, Flash. The devil makes us do his best work when we're all alone.

FLASH: Don't look at me. You took his drink away from him and walked off with it! Like you had a purpose for it.

DARLENE: That's right!

LISA: Don't start with me, you little tramp! You went backstage, too! You could have spiked his drink while Flash was looking (*She looks DARLENE over from head to toe.*) . . . somewhere else.

BRAD: Hey, you shouldn't be attacking Darlene!

FLASH: Oh, listen to Opie here. Mr. Clean Cut, All-American Brad Reese. You jumped at the chance to run backstage to get Henshaw's drink for him. Nobody back there to watch you.

BRAD: I was doing a favor!

FLASH: A favor for someone you hated!

HARCOURT: Hated? What are you talking about?

FLASH: Look, Harcourt, check out the facts. What do the police always look for in a murder? Motive, means, opportunity.

BRAD: So?

FLASH: Well, it's obvious that we all had opportunity to poison him.

LISA: And the means would be the strychnine. It was out there in the open, accessible to all of us.

FLASH: Right. So all we have to do is figure out which one of us had the motive. Sure, Mark Henshaw was a jerk. But who had the motive to kill him? And I'll tell you all . . . (*He points to BRAD.*) He's sitting right on this stage.

BRAD: What!!

FLASH: It was no secret how much you despised Henshaw! You hated being his understudy!

BRAD: Why would I hate that? Hey, an understudy is a necessary part of theatre. What I do is important.

LISA: Keep talking, Bradley, you'll convince yourself one day.

BRAD: Okay, look, maybe there was some jealousy between Mark and myself.

FLASH: Not on Mark's end of it. If he wasn't belittling you, he was ignoring you altogether. If there was any jealousy involved, it was you being jealous of Mark.

BRAD: (*Explodes.*) I wasn't jealous of him! I just . . . I studied his part, I memorized it. I know all of the nuances of the role. I was always ready, waiting to go on. If I could just get the chance to go onstage, everyone would see that I'm not just some kid they can laugh about . . . But I never got a chance, because Mark Henshaw never missed a performance. And he loved to ridicule me about my acting. Like he knew anything about acting. I could act circles around him! Right? (*He looks around to his fellow actors, who uncomfortably look away.*) Anyway . . . He called me names and made fun of me, but it was all in fun. He was too much of an egomaniac to think about me.

LISA: Good point. Face it, Mark Henshaw's biggest fan was Mark Henshaw.

FLASH: (*Chuckles.*) I did wonder how he got his head through the door some times.

BRAD: A star with a big ego can do a lot of damage to a group, you know. Look at Paragon Studios.

DARLENE: Who?

BRAD: Paragon Studios. Didn't you ever hear about the scandal that almost killed them?

DARLENE: No.

BRAD: I heard about it once. There was some huge, spectacular movie being filmed a few years ago at Paragon. The lead actress was some kind of prima donna, and she got fired halfway through the film. It almost sunk the whole studio. Paragon really took a bath on it. They had already built sets, hired hundreds of extras, dumped a ton of money into it. And then they had to can this actress because of her ego trips. The movie never got completed. The studio nearly went bankrupt and became the laughingstock of the industry. Boy, that must have been one egotistical actress, to think she would - -

LISA: (*Coldly.*) That was me, Bradley.

BRAD: (*After a pause.*) . . . It was?

LISA: Yes.

BRAD: Oh. Uh . . . I didn't know that.

DARLENE: Oh, maybe I did hear about that. I heard they fired you because you went crazy.

LISA: You heard wrong, you little nitwit. If it's any of your collective businesses, I became pregnant during filming and they couldn't find a way to shoot around it. End of story.

FLASH: Well, la-de-da.

LISA: What is that supposed to mean?

FLASH: Nothing. Actually, it just proves Brad's original point about egos, that's all.

LISA: I am not an egomaniac. Don't pigeonhole me in the same category as Mark Henshaw.

FLASH: I'm not. All I'm saying is that Henshaw had an ego the size of the Grand Canyon.

HARCOURT: None of us will doubt that, that's for sure.

LISA: The man was an idiot. One big scheme after another. One time, he was even going to start his own playhouse. He was going to call it the Henshaw Theater.

BRAD: I remember him bragging about that one time. Why didn't he ever do that?

LISA: I don't know. I think the money he needed for it fell through. God knows how he thought he could raise the kind of money for a project like that.

BRAD: Borrow it, probably. He was always borrowing money from me. Never paid it back, but man! Did he like to borrow it!

FLASH: Yeah, he was like that.

HARCOURT: He was notorious for doing that to a lot of people, Flash. Not just Brad. So would you say that vindicates our young Mr. Reese, here?

FLASH: Didn't say that.

HARCOURT: What do you mean?

FLASH: (*To BRAD.*) Do you remember the day a couple of weeks ago when you said to me, "Someday it'll be me out there onstage getting the applause, not that no-talent hack"?

BRAD: I was just shooting my mouth off.

FLASH: And you followed it up with, "And that day is coming soon. I've done it before and I'll do it again." I asked you what you meant, but you just walked away.

BRAD: I meant nothing.

HARCOURT: The same way you meant nothing when you threatened Mark earlier tonight?

BRAD: Harcourt! I thought you were my friend!

HARCOURT: I am your friend. I just want to explore all possible angles of this situation.

BRAD: Well, you seem to be awfully eager to steer the conversation towards blaming me. Maybe you should explore some of your own angles!

HARCOURT: Whatever do you mean?

BRAD: Why don't you tell us who Walter Brewer is? (*HARCOURT stiffens as though kicked in the back. He glares at BRAD, who has no idea what he has just said.*) I mean . . . if you want.

FLASH: Walter Brewer? Who's that?

LISA: Harcourt, darling, what is he talking about?

DARLENE: Who is he talking about? Who's Walter Brewer?

HARCOURT: (*Glaring at BRAD.*) Where did you hear that name?

BRAD: (*Nervously.*) Um . . . Mark said it once. That's all he said. Honest. (*A pause while HARCOURT continues glaring at him.*) He-he-he said that if you ever got mad at me and I wanted to shut you up, to just say your old buddy Walter Brewer came all the way from Manchester and was in the audience that night. Honest, that's all he said. I have no idea what he meant.

FLASH: Want to fill us in, Harcourt?

HARCOURT: (*After a pause; choosing his words carefully.*) Walter Brewer is nobody. He is someone I used to know and I no longer associate with him. (*To BRAD.*) And you should know better than to put any stock in Mark Henshaw's big mouth and obnoxious personality.

BRAD: Okay. Okay. I won't bring it up again.

FLASH: So, did you have business dealings with this Brewer guy, or what?

HARCOURT: (*Turns on FLASH.*) It is none of your business, Mister Burns. If we're going to bring up the past, why don't you tell everyone about your business dealings with Mark Henshaw?

FLASH: I don't know what you're talking about. Henshaw got me the job as stage manager for this company. I took it, end of story.

HARCOURT: But you knew him from before, didn't you? (*A pause.*) Didn't you?

FLASH: Yeah, we had some business contact. So what? And how did you know about it, anyway?

HARCOURT: Your bedfellows betray you. (*FLASH looks at DARLENE.*)

FLASH: You told him?

DARLENE: I didn't tell him to get you in trouble. It was in your defense.

LISA: What are you talking about, and would you care to enlighten the rest of us?

FLASH: Oh, I knew Henshaw from years back. He squirreled out on some money he owed me. No big deal.

HARCOURT: She (*DARLENE*.) made it sound like a big deal.

DARLENE: Well, it was!

FLASH: Hey, why don't you keep your mouth shut? Quit talking about my personal business to everyone! (*DARLENE looks at him, hurt.*) Don't give me that innocent act. I know better. And so did Mark Henshaw.

DARLENE: Flash . . . !

FLASH: You want to nail me with this murder rap? Well, why don't you tell everyone about your past with Henshaw? And with just about every guy you ever met?

BRAD: You shouldn't talk about Darlene like that! She's the sweetest girl I've ever met.

LISA: Are you serious? She's seen more naked men than the YMCA locker room. (*To audience, smiling.*) Sometimes the old lines are the classics.

DARLENE: (*Tracing wrinkles on her own face.*) Well, you'd know about old lines, wouldn't you?

LISA: Why you . . . ! (*She starts for DARLENE, but HARCOURT holds her back.*)

DARLENE: Yes, Mark and I had a little fling once, a long time ago. He ruined my life. He took something from me that I can never get back.

LISA: Sounds like motive to me. Care to fill us in on the details, honey?

DARLENE: No. Would you care to fill us in on your details, honey?

LISA: I didn't know you were so interested in my life story.

DARLENE: Sure. Start at the beginning and tell us, at the rate of one year per minute. We have a couple of hours to spare. (*LISA glares at her.*) That was pretty good for thinking it up just now, wasn't it?

LISA: You miserable little . . .

HARCOURT: Careful . . .

DARLENE: Why don't you tell everyone about how you knew Mark? How you couldn't hold on to him, just like you couldn't hold on to your career?

“YOU KNOW THE OLD SLAYING . . . ”

LISA leaps at her. HARCOURT and the others hold her back.

HARCOURT: I think we should all calm down. Take a deep breath. *(To audience.)* In fact, while we take a breather, perhaps you kind people could shed some light on this nasty little situation. We're going to take a short intermission. During that time, we'd like you to think about the terrible events of tonight. You will have a chance to present any concerns you may have to our cast members. They will join you shortly in the lobby area during intermission. If you have any questions for any of them, feel free to approach them about it. Now is your chance to find out a little more information. So take a break and stretch your legs, but don't go away . . .

LISA: . . . The fun's just beginning.

END ACT ONE.

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