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The Night I Died at the Palace Theatre



Mystery/Comedy
by Pat Cook

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Mystery/Comedy. By Pat Cook.

Cast: 6m., 6w. The Palace Theatre actors are just getting ready to rehearse the final scene for their latest production, "I Ain't Got No Body," when they run into a snag. The director who wrote the play is found dead onstage. Lois is shocked into an allergy attack! Ava faints! Luther orders a pizza! There's a lot of disbelief among the troupe until it becomes quite evident that Dexter Allan has, indeed, shuffled off this mortal coil. Not only that, he owed several of the actors a lot of money. "I know you can't take it with you," Gordon moans, "but apparently you can take somebody else's!" And then Frances dies! Only she doesn't really die. And then the pizza kid shows up. Only he really isn't the pizza kid. The one thing they all are sure of is their director is dead ... or is he? Timothy accuses Gordon! Glenda accuses Dana! Luther can't figure out where his pizza is. And baby-faced detective Jimmy Todd has to put together all the clues. Maybe, thinks Jimmy, there are clues in the play they are producing. After all, Dexter wrote it. Was he trying to leave a hint? Or was he murdered for what was in that missing final scene? Clues intermingle with unveiled threats as cast member turns against cast member. Who heard Dexter's final words? Who kept threatening him for all to hear? And just when is Luther going to get his pizza anyway? This comedy-filled mystery is brought to you by the author of *Death and Taxes* and *Three Murders and It's Only Monday!* *One simple set. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: N59.*

Cover design: Jeanette Alig-Sergel

ISBN-10 1-58342-657-4
ISBN-13 978-1-58342-657-9



www.dramaticpublishing.com



Dramatic Publishing
311 Washington St.
Woodstock, IL 60098
ph: 800-448-7469



Printed on recycled paper

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Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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(THE NIGHT I DIED AT THE PALACE THEATRE)

ISBN: 978-1-58342-657-9

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The Night I Died at the Palace Theatre

CHARACTERS

THEODORE BUTLER Swiss janitor with a secret, 45
DANA PUGH. mousey assistant director, 30ish
LOIS BIRDWELL emotional hypochondriac, 35
KALENE COOPER egotistic actress, late 30s
GORDON DONNELL. complaining actor, 40
AVA DONNELL. . . Gordon's southern belle wife, late 30s
GLENDA HOWARD. sarcastic dowager, 50+
LUTHER WALLACE. not-too-bright actor, 30 or so
TIMOTHY PRICE pompous actor, 40
FRANCES PRESTON tomboy of an actress, 35
JIMMY TODD baby-faced but brilliant policeman
Sgt. MIKE MALLORY by-the-book cop, 40ish

TIME: The present.

PLACE: The stage of the Palace Theatre.

ACT ONE

SETTING: *The stage of the Palace Theatre. Obviously set for a play rehearsal there is masking tape on the floor marking walls, doors and such. There are three folding chairs set up representing a couch just L of C, while others are simply chairs and placed at random. There is a card table set up R. This is where the actors leave their scripts, purses and personal effects during rehearsal. Also, just up from C is a long table with a body on it, covered with a sheet. There is also another table set up DL with an open champagne bottle and glasses sitting on it. There are three overturned chairs downstage. Downstage far R is a small couch or settee, facing out at an angle. This is where the suspects will give their testimonies.*

A solo LIGHT comes up on the settee. THEODORE sits nervously.

THEODORE. Yah, sure, I tell you what I know which ain't much. I am de janitor, I take care of de place, clean up, you know. And dese actors, dey always treat me nice. But sometimes I don't understand them bein' so messy. And den I hear one of dem say sometin' like, "Oh, dat was neat!" or "What you did was neat." (*He shakes his*

head.) One ting they ain't is neat. Anyways, I was called in tonight special. See, I don't work at night I work in de daytime. I was here today like usual but left early, since I was to be here agin tonight. I left at four thirty out dat back door and locked it behind me. Tonight I was called in on accounta I was to do some special cleanin', see? And I git here yust after dat Dana lady, de director's helper. She git here first so I come in after her and git to work while she works on de stage out dere. And I start my cleanin' backstage. Then I hear her goin' on about sometin' what ain't right. I figgered she's actin', you know? I didn't know den she was talkin' about finding a dead body!

(The solo LIGHT blacks out on THEODORE and LIGHTS come up full on the main area. At first no one is onstage. After a slight pause, DANA enters from R, carrying a large notebook. She is studying the notebook as she enters. She sees the overturned chairs and begins talking to herself.)

DANA. I can't believe these people think they can treat me like this. *(She drops her notebook on the R table and begins picking up and straightening the chairs.)* It's like they can't think for themselves. "Dana, do this!" and "Dana, do that." "Dana, will you get me a Coke?" "Dana, will you see if I turned off my car lights?" "Dana, there's a clean-up on aisle four." *(She looks up.)* Good, the lights are on. Bunch of whining idiots, that's what they are! Just throw chairs everywhere, who cares? What a bunch of babies! Well, if they think I'll do whatever they want they have another think coming. I'm the

assistant director not the janitor! I'll show them, I just won't pick up the chairs. (*She looks at the chairs, now sitting upright.*) Oh, I don't believe it! I did it without thinking! (*She looks out wide-eyed.*) They've got me programmed! (*She looks at the table.*) No, no, no! (*She moves to the table.*) The dead body doesn't show up in the second act! (*She is now standing behind table. She grabs the sheet near the feet of the body.*) Who on earth put it out here now? (*She lifts the sheet exposing the two-toned shoes and the legs.*) I thought I was the only one here unless somebody else... (*She looks at the shoes.*) Wait. Who changed the shoes on the dummy? Those look just like Dexter's shoes. Surely he wouldn't have loaned those two-tones to the theatre and... (*Suddenly, she gets an idea—a wild idea, a horrible idea—and it shows on her face.*) Wait. Wait just one little minute here. (*She moves to the head of the body, leans over and reaches for the sheet. Suddenly she draws a hand back.*) Na, what'm I thinking?! They just changed out the shoes, this isn't...I mean this can't be... (*She reaches for the sheet and lifts it slowly. She peeks under it, then quickly slams her hand down on the table recovering the corpse.*) It's Dexter! (*She quickly steps back a few paces from the table.*) He's...he's...he can't be! He's not. He wouldn't! He... (*She gets an idea and a large smile crosses her face.*) Oh, I get it! (*She casually moves back to the table.*) Good one, Dexter. You really had me going there for a minute. Ha ha ha HA! (*She eyes the corpse for a reaction.*) You caught me, all right. Boy, will you have a great story to tell the others. (*Again, no reaction.*) How you caught ol' Dana. Yessiree Bob! (*Again nothing. DANA's voice cracks.*)

You can stop now. Come on, stop clowning around. The joke's gone on long enough. Dexter? Dex-ter. (*Slowly she lifts the sheet at the head and looks under it.*) Ha ha ha? (*Again she slams her hand down and quickly moves to the "couch."*) I didn't see him, I didn't find him, I don't know anything about it! (*She sits down and hugs herself, rocking back and forth.*)

(*At that moment, KALENE and LOIS enter from L, followed by GORDON, AVA, GLENDA, LUTHER, TIMOTHY and FRANCES. GORDON and TIMOTHY are both carrying scripts and the ladies all have large shoulder bags or purses.*)

KALENE. Listen, I don't care if he *is* the director, I have opinions, too.

LOIS. Why are you telling this to me, Kalene?

KALENE. I know I'm only an actress—

GORDON. Yes, *only*!

KALENE. I wasn't talking to you, Gordon Donnell!

AVA. You gonna try to argue with Kalene now?

GORDON. I don't know what I was thinking about. (*Casually he drops his script on the R table.*)

(*The rest of the group drop their scripts and purses on the table, except for LUTHER. No one is paying attention to DANA.*)

LUTHER (*holding a script*). Hey, you know? I don't much care for this character I'm playing.

TIMOTHY. Something amiss, Luther? Your role seems tailor-made.

LUTHER. Yeah, but this guy is *so* dumb!

(The others, except for DANA, all turn and look at LUTHER.)

GLENDA *(moving to LUTHER)*. Luther. Be thankful Dexter's letting you speak this time. Remember our Christmas show? You played a bale of hay.

LUTHER *(proudly)*. I was a haystack!

GLENDA *(moving away)*. I stand corrected.

LOIS. We're blocking the final scene tonight, right? Anybody seen it?

FRANCES. That's Dana's job. *(She indicates DANA but again ignores her.)* When she gets around to it.

LOIS. Aren't we blocking the final scene? Finally finding out who the murderer is?

GORDON. Well, if anybody would know it would be you.

LOIS. What? Why do you say that, why me?

AVA *(to GORDON)*. You're just itching for a fight tonight, aren't you?

GORDON. I just made a comment.

AVA. No, you made a snide remark.

GORDON *(amazed)*. Where'd you get that phrase?

AVA *(a bit hurt)*. It was in our summer meller-drama. Don't you think I have brains enough to broaden my vocabulary? *(She turns and walks away from GORDON.)*

GORDON *(watches her)*. Looks broad enough to me already.

LOIS *(moves to DANA)*. Dana, are we or are we not getting the last scene tonight?

(DANA sits rocking and doesn't answer.)

FRANCES (*turns and looks at DANA*). Dana, dear, question before the house. Did Dexter write the last scene or not?

LOIS. Dana?

(LIGHTS blackout onstage and the solo LIGHT comes up on the settee. DANA is sitting, wringing her hands.)

DANA (*rapid-fire*). That's right, that's right, I was the first one here so I found Dexter. I mean if somebody else came here first *they* would've found the body; it just so happens I was first and I couldn't have been here long without finding him just the same as anybody else, that doesn't mean anything, does it? (*She leans out a bit as if listening. She sits back and continues more slowly and trying to control herself.*) Like I said, I got here first and that janitor came in after me. Dexter? Oh, he never arrived first. He always liked to make a grand entrance. I can only guess he must've met somebody else here earlier. Maybe a pick-up rehearsal for one of the actors. He was having trouble with...maybe I shouldn't say this. Well, he had mentioned to me that he needed to have words...with Timothy.

(The solo LIGHT blacks out on the settee and LIGHTS come up full onstage. DANA is in her original position.)

GLENDA. What on earth is wrong with the girl-child now?

FRANCES. What do you mean, *now*?

GLENDA. Well, she's always talking to herself, now isn't she?

FRANCES. Maybe it's in self defense.

GLEND A. And, pray tell, just what do you mean by that?

FRANCES. Maybe she's tired of listening to you.

GORDON (*appreciating this*). Ooh hoo, now, *that's* a snide remark!

KALENE. Oh, I get it. The silent treatment. (*Right in DANA's face.*) Well, it won't work, Dana m'dear. Just because your precious boss, our pompous director, isn't here yet doesn't mean you can cop out too.

DANA (*numbly*). He's here.

KALENE. Where? I don't see him. (*She looks out.*) Is he out front? (*She shades her eyes with her hand so she can see.*)

LUTHER (*to FRANCES*). Do you think I'm dumb, Frances?

TIMOTHY (*correcting him*). No, Luther, dumb means you are mute, cannot talk. As during your stint as said haystack. What you meant to ask her is does she think you are stupid.

LUTHER. Oh. Well, if I got the question wrong she'll probably give me the wrong answer.

TIMOTHY (*flummoxed*). You know, you have your own logic. (*He moves to the body.*)

LUTHER (*proudly*). Thank you, Timothy.

KALENE (*calling out*). Dexter! I know you're out there!

LOIS (*hugging herself*). Why do they always keep this place so cold?

GLEND A. Oh, Lois, don't start in already; the temperature is just fine.

LOIS. I just know I'm going to catch my death.

DANA (*jumps to her feet*). Don't say that!

LOIS. What?

GLEND A (*also moving to DANA*). What did she say?

TIMOTHY. Why is the corpse out here tonight? I thought we got rid of it in Act One?

DANA. That's not the corpse. (*Trying to compose herself.*)

I mean that's not the phony corpse, the dummy.

That's...that's... (*She points to the body but cannot say it.*)

GLENDA (*after a slight pause*). Come on, dear, what is it?

First word? (*She taps ear.*) Sounds like?

DANA. I...I...I can't say it! (*She sits again.*)

GORDON. What is she talking about now?

(*TIMOTHY looks off UL. Then he exits, unseen by the others.*)

AVA. What does that poor child mean it's not the phony corpse?

KALENE (*still facing out*). Dex-TER! Come out, come out, wherever you are!

(*FRANCES moves to KALENE.*)

LOIS (*to GLENDA*). She's starting to scare me. (*She indicates DANA.*)

GLENDA. It's all intimidation, Lolo. She throws a scare into you and she has the upper hand for the rest of the run. She learned that from Dexter.

FRANCES (*to KALENE*). Why don't you just drag him up here onstage and tie him up.

KALENE. I would if I thought that would make him listen to me.

LOIS (*upset, to GLENDA*). I'm not that gullible, you know, Glenda. Why do you always talk down to me?

FRANCES. Don't take it personally, Lois, she talks down to everybody.

GLENDА (to LOIS). What? I don't talk down to you. In fact, I envy you.

LOIS. You envy *me*?

GLENDА. Yes. It must be wonderful to have the guts to dress like that and go out in public.

LOIS (*confused*). Do what?

GORDON (*moves to DANA*). Hold on, everyone. What did she mean it's not the phony corpse? Is it the dummy or not?

(TIMOTHY enters from UL holding the dummy corpse.)

TIMOTHY. In answer to your question, Gordon, uhm...no. (*He holds up the dummy.*)

AVA (*nervously*). But...but if that's the dummy... (*points to the body on the table*) ...then what's that? (*She points to the dummy.*)

LUTHER (*venturing a guess*). The understudy?

(*All the others, except for DANA, turn and glare at him. TIMOTHY drapes the dummy, face down, over the back of a chair.*)

GORDON. Oh no, I think Dana means...! (*He rushes up-stage of the body and slowly lifts the sheet at its head. The others watch him intently. He looks up with a dazed expression on his face and lowers the sheet.*)

FRANCES. What're you doing now?

TIMOTHY (*fearfully*). Gordon? Is it...?

AVA. Is that...*Dexter*?!

GLENDА (*blandly*). Come on, Gordon, first word, first syllable, sounds like?

FRANCES. Glenda, will you shut up for one minute?!

GORDON (*wide-eyed*). I don't believe it! (*He looks at the others.*) It's *him*. It's...Dexter!

AVA. No! (*She puts her hand to her forehead.*) I...I...I...

GORDON. Somebody grab Ava. (*AVA falls to the floor without anyone making a move toward her.*) Never mind.

LUTHER. She fainted *again*?

GORDON (*as if thinking of something else*). One of her best things. She faints at everything: weddings, funerals, card tricks...

(LIGHTS blackout onstage and the solo LIGHT comes up on the settee. AVA sits fanning herself.)

AVA. I'll try to tell you what all I know. We all arrived together tonight. I mean all the actors came in together and all; Dana was already here. Everyone seemed to be making a big brouhaha about how she was acting, Dana I mean. She seemed the same to me...only...only like she was making out to be fidgety, you know? No, not like antsy, none of that. I swear! (*She fans herself rapidly.*) I can't believe any of this! No, she was acting more like...well, kinda guilty, you know? Oh, one other thing y'all will probably find out about later. Gordon, my husband, well, the thing is he loaned Dexter some money. Eight thousand dollars. And Dexter kept putting him off, you know, paying it back. So I came here this afternoon to talk to Dexter...but I couldn't get in. I guess that was around four, maybe later.