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The Fall of the House of Usher

A Play In Two Acts

Adapted and Dramatized by

TIM KELLY

(From the classic thriller of Edgar Allan Poe)

Dramatic Publishing Company

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TIM KELLY

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(THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER)

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Here's Edgar Allan Poe's most famous tale of supernatural horror brought to the theatre by Tim Kelly, the screenwriter responsible for many of the highly acclaimed "Poe Films." The production is amazingly simple and uncomplicated to stage, yet theatrically fascinating for both cast and audience.

It begins in Baltimore, in a tavern called *The Raven*, during a howling storm. The city is fascinated by a recently discovered case of premature burial. Actresses and dancers from a nearby theatre can talk of nothing else. Soon a mysterious Stranger and a young woman suffering from some curious malady seek shelter. The tale the Stranger unfolds soon has the listeners mesmerized. It is the account of a visit to a gloomy mansion where Roderick Usher and his sister Madelaine are possessed by an evilness that endangers them physically. The family doctor, Fortunato, searches for a cure while the menacing walls take shape and speak out:

HARKEN TO THE VOICES GRAVEN,
LISTEN TO THE CALL OF DOOM.
WE THE MOSS-ENCRUSTED BASTIONS
ARE THE STONES THAT MAKE THIS TOMB
OF THE HOUSE OF USHER.

Madelaine "dies" and is buried, only to claw her way free and accuse her brother of entombing her *alive*! Eventually, the house is destroyed and its darkest secrets forever buried. The Stranger flees the tavern, and the listeners, including a Parisian detective, M. Dupin, are left to ponder the truth of the account and the identity of its teller.

The play abounds in moments of haunting beauty – a ghostly waltz in the Usher family crypt, and a visit by the brother's loving sweetheart, Lenore. Moments of chilling horror – Madelaine forcing aside the lid of her coffin while a hooded figure roams the halls in search of escape. Whenever the horrific visions of Poe threaten to terrify the audience completely, there is always a light moment to compensate. There are many small character roles arranged for a convenient rehearsal schedule. A simple set arrangement accommodates all the scenes without a break in the action.

An unusually exciting theatre event awaits those who produce Tim Kelly's *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Written For Flexible Casting: approximately 10 women and 7 men, or
11 women, 6 men, plus a chorus of four or more women and/or men.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(In Order of Appearance)

ACTOR, out of work, as usual

LUCY, a servant girl

MRS. DAWSON, wife of the tavern owner

MR. DAWSON, owner of "The Raven" tavern

STRANGER, fugitive from the storm

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN, his companion

FIRST GIRL DANCER, a theatrical performer

SECOND GIRL DANCER, another

THIRD GIRL DANCER, another

MAID AT THE HOUSE OF USHER, frightened

DOCTOR FORTUNATO, Roderick's physician

HOODED FIGURE, a specter of fear

HOUSEKEEPER, at House of Usher

RODERICK USHER, present owner of the House of Usher

MADELAINE, his sister

C. AUGUSTE DUPIN, a French detective

LENORE, Roderick's fiancée

and

THE WALLS OF THE HOUSE OF USHER, a chorus of ghostly dancers



SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT ONE

Scene 1: A tavern in the city of Baltimore. 1840. Night.

Scene 2: A path leading to the House of Usher.

Scene 3: The House of Usher.

ACT TWO

Scene 1: The tavern.

Scene 2: The House of Usher.

Scene 3: The tavern.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

By Tim Kelly

ACT I

Scene 1

[Setting: A tavern or inn catering to theatrical performers. At Left is a serving table that also functions as a registration desk. On the table are plates, bottles, mugs, a ledger, a quill pen and ink pot. Down Right Center is a table with three stools or chairs. Down Right is a small sofa or chaise lounge. Up Left Center is a small table, preferably square, with a stool. Up Right Center there is a wooden bench with, maybe, a clothes-horse for hats and cloaks.

The simple setting is designed for drapes, since there will be changes in locale as the tale unfolds. However, the room can be dressed up with some additional props, if desired: rugs, candles, a large potted fern. A fireplace with a glow in the hearth proves effective, if it can be managed. Characters could warm themselves after entering from the cold.

Entrance into the tavern from the outside street is offstage Right. Entrance into the kitchen is Down Left, below the serving table. Up Left leads to the second-story sleeping chambers.

A few seconds prior to Curtain, we hear the sound of a STORM, WIND, RAIN, occasional THUNDER.

At Rise: Slow CURTAIN as the WIND and RAIN whip up and then subside. Seated at the table Down Center is ACTOR, who is reading something from a newspaper, aloud. His audience consists of LUCY, an impressionable young maid. She is bent over, one elbow on the table, her chin resting in the cup of her hand. The ACTOR's voice and manner are flamboyant and melodramatic]

ACTOR. *[Reading]* "The wife of one of our most respected citizens – a lawyer of eminence – was seized with a sudden and unaccountable illness, which completely baffled the skill of her physicians . . ."

LUCY. Go on.

ACTOR. Are you certain you want to hear all this?

LUCY. Please.

ACTOR. Since you insist. *[Continues]* "After much suffering she died, or was believed to be dead."

LUCY. [*Enthralled*] Believed to be dead?

ACTOR. [*Continues*] “No one suspected, indeed, or had reason to suspect, that she was not actually dead.” [*Puts down paper*] Incredible. [*Intones from Hamlet*] “There are more things in heaven and earth, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

LUCY. Forget you’re an actor for a moment, can’t you? Don’t stop with the reading. [*Pleading*] Keep on.

ACTOR. [*Motions with newspaper*] You can read it for yourself.

LUCY. That’s a good idea. Except for one thing.

ACTOR. What is that?

LUCY. I don’t know how to read, and I can barely scratch my name, but I do love a good scary story.

ACTOR. [*Indicates article he’s been reading*] This is more than a “good scary story.” It’s not fiction – it’s fact. Proven, incontestable, undeniable. [*Glowering at her dramatically*] You’ll have nightmares.

LUCY. [*Straightens up*] I never have nightmares.

ACTOR. Never?

LUCY. Nothing scares me.

ACTOR. [*Disbelieves*] Indeed.

LUCY. Some people are scared of shadows. Some of black cats. I’ve known folks to faint away at the sound of thunder. This storm will scare more than a few.

ACTOR. Weren’t you frightened when you saw me on stage last month in Richard III? [*Over-acting the role*] Plotting evil, washing my hands in blood, speaking wicked thoughts. [*Leaning over her menacingly*] My performance inspired terror in the orchestra seats.

LUCY. [*Laughing at him*] I thought you was rather funny.

ACTOR. Funny? [*Horried*] Did you say funny? [*Can’t believe it*] Funny!

LUCY. Walking around with all that tin on your chest.

ACTOR. [*Pedantically*] It was a breastplate.

LUCY. Whatever it was, it made you look a bit like a candlestick.

ACTOR. [*Frowns*] You have the instincts of a critic.

LUCY. I only meant that I wasn’t frightened when I saw you in front of the painted drop, shrieking and moaning.

ACTOR. [*Disappointed*] I suspect that’s because you work in this inn that caters to the theatrical profession. Meeting dancers and monologists, animal trainers and jugglers, must rob you of some imagination.

LUCY. Never. Mrs. Dawson says I’ve too much imagination.

ACTOR. To you the actor is commonplace. You see me behind the footlights going to my doom but you know well enough you’ll be serving me breakfast the following morning.

[MRS. DAWSON, wife of the owner, enters Down Left, a pleasant, good-natured woman. She is wiping a mug with a towel, steps behind the serving table]

LUCY. I don't see what any of this has to do with what we were talking about.

MRS. DAWSON. And what were you talking about, Lucy?

LUCY. Being buried.

MRS. DAWSON. [*Certainly she hasn't heard correctly*] "Buried" did you say?

LUCY. When you don't want to be. When you're still breathing.

MRS. DAWSON. [*Bewildered*] Still breathing?

LUCY. [*Steps to serving table*] It's in the paper, Mrs. Dawson. [*Recalling Actor's words*] It's fact. Proven, incontestable, undeniable.

MRS. DAWSON. What are you talking about? [*Puts down mug, picks up another from table, checks for dirt, cleans*]

LUCY. [*To Actor*] Go on. Tell her.

ACTOR. It's all here. Down in black and white. The full account.

MRS. DAWSON. Full account of what?

ACTOR. [*Ominous tone*] Premature burial.

MRS. DAWSON. Premature what?

LUCY. [*Excited*] Burial. In the ground. She wasn't dead.

MRS. DAWSON. [*Cautiously*] What are you going on about? Who wasn't dead?

ACTOR. It's a most interesting case. Seems the unfortunate lady presented all the ordinary appearances of death. According to this account, she was put in her family vault, which, for three subsequent years, was undisturbed.

MRS. DAWSON. [*Awed*] I've heard quite enough, thank you. I'll read it for myself. [*Thinks*] Or, maybe, I won't.

LUCY. How am I ever going to hear the end of the story? [*To Actor*] I have a feeling Mrs. Dawson will use that newspaper to start a fire in the oven.

MRS. DAWSON. No concern of yours, Lucy, one way or the other. It's a cold night. The girls from the theatre will be half-frozen.

LUCY. [*Reluctantly*] Yes, ma'am. Right away. You will save the newspaper?

MRS. DAWSON. Lucy!

[LUCY exits Up Left. Sound of WIND and/or RAIN up]

ACTOR. You can be sure the theatre was mostly empty tonight. Bad weather doesn't sell tickets.

[MR. DAWSON enters Right, a long woolen scarf wrapped around his neck, rubbing his hands to ward off the chill. He's a hardworking man whose main interest is the prosperity of his tavern. (Husband and wife use "Mr." and "Mrs." as terms of endearment.) Sound of BAD WEATHER fades]

MRS. DAWSON. Good evening, husband.

MR. DAWSON. I'm frozen to the bone. It's a wicked night, Mrs. Dawson.

MRS. DAWSON. Cup of hot cider will fix you up, my dear. *[She exits Down Left]*

MR. DAWSON. That's my wife's solution to any problem – hot cider.

ACTOR. Did you happen to pass the theatre?

MR. DAWSON. I did. Doorman told me there were more people on the stage than in the seats. The stalls were empty. *[Sits on sofa]*

ACTOR. Winter's not the best time to play Baltimore. In the winter the theatres are too cold.

MR. DAWSON. I've heard actors complain about the summer. The theatres are too hot. If you ask me there is no "best time" in Baltimore as far as actors are concerned. Anything in the paper?

ACTOR. Something quite astonishing. Seems some unfortunate lady got herself buried alive.

MR. DAWSON. Why'd she want to do something like that? *[Rubs his chin]* I've always said females are peculiar creatures. Can't imagine what the good Lord had in mind when He created them.

MRS. DAWSON. *[Entering Down Left, a cup in her hands]* The hot cider will make you feel better, Mister Dawson. *[She crosses behind sofa and hands the cup to her husband]*

MR. DAWSON. Ah, good. Thank you, Mrs. Dawson. You're a comfort.

ACTOR. You can have the paper if you'd like to read it for yourself.

MR. DAWSON. It's not the sort of thing I fancy when I do my reading. *[Sips]* Buried alive? That is grim, that is.

MRS. DAWSON. *[To Actor]* Back to that again, are we? *[Steps to table]* You mustn't excite Lucy with such tales – she's got such a wild imagination. Too much imagination can be a dangerous thing.

ACTOR. *[Doesn't agree]* I don't think I can endorse that position.

MRS. DAWSON. She was fascinated with that newspaper article.

ACTOR. It's a story that would appeal to young people. Unusual, uncommon, mysterious. It's the sort of thing we adults object to on principle. *[Holds up newspaper]* However, according to the journalist, this premature burial was not an isolated case.

MRS. DAWSON. Then it should be.

[Sound of WIND or RAIN up, followed by LOUD KNOCKING at door, offstage Right]

MRS. DAWSON. What's that?

MR. DAWSON. *[Listens]* You mean the storm?

MRS. DAWSON. I heard someone knocking.

MR. DAWSON. Nonsense.

ACTOR. The wind.

[Again, LOUD KNOCKING. MRS. DAWSON starts toward the Right exit. The LOUD KNOCKING is repeated]

MRS. DAWSON. Must be the young ladies from the theatre. *[She exits Right. During the following dialogue we can barely hear MRS. DAWSON greeting someone at the door, conversing in surprise with statements like "Here, let me help you. . . oh, the poor thing can hardly walk . . . what a shame to be out in weather like this," etc. ad lib]*

MR. DAWSON. It's nice to see artists working.

ACTOR. Any day now I expect to have the leading role in a new production of King Lear.

MR. DAWSON. If I were you I'd take any role in any play. Your bill is long overdue.

ACTOR. *[Frowns, recovers quickly, gives a flourish with his arm]* I suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune!

MR. DAWSON. You couldn't have said it better if William Shakespeare wrote those words himself.

ACTOR. He did. *[Stands, makes an announcement]* Mr. Dawson, my word is my bond. You will have your pound of flesh.

MR. DAWSON. It's not flesh I'm interested in. It's rent.

ACTOR. My being "at liberty" is only a temporary condition. My services will shortly be in great demand. I'm expecting a bank draft from a famous producer within the week.

MR. DAWSON. Won't be the first time I've heard that.

ACTOR. *[Indignant]* I assure you –

[MRS. DAWSON's voice cuts him off in mid-sentence]

MRS. DAWSON. *[Offstage]* Careful with her. Poor thing must be frozen to the bone. The wind's bitter cold. *[MR. DAWSON stands, steps Down Right. MRS. DAWSON hurries in, speaking to someone, as yet, unseen]* Put her on the sofa. She looks exhausted. *[MRS. DAWSON hurries behind serving table and pours something into a mug. STRANGER enters. He wears a flowing cape and a hat that conceals his facial features. With him is a MYSTERIOUS YOUNG WOMAN, in her teens, pale, forlorn. She leans against the Stranger for support]*

ACTOR. What's wrong?

STRANGER. We were on our way to Washington, but the storm caught us. Our carriage overturned in a ditch. We barely escaped with our lives.

MR. DAWSON. [*Reaching to guide the MYSTERIOUS WOMAN to sofa*] Sit down, young woman. You look as if you're about to fall. [*MYSTERIOUS WOMAN sits, her head resting on the back of sofa. MRS. DAWSON hurries over, sits beside the Mysterious Woman, helps her to drink. STRANGER moves left of table*]

MRS. DAWSON. Sip of this will do you good. Warm the blood and chase the chill. [*MYSTERIOUS WOMAN sips*] Better? [*MYSTERIOUS WOMAN nods*]

ACTOR. Should I fetch a doctor?

MR. DAWSON. Might be wise.

STRANGER. [*Quickly*] That will not be necessary.

MRS. DAWSON. But, sir, she's in a bad way. A doctor should be summoned.

STRANGER. I repeat – that will not be necessary. [*The STRANGER's voice is deep, commanding. Almost hypnotic*]

MRS. DAWSON. Surely you won't continue on?

STRANGER. As soon as the storm passes.

ACTOR. But your carriage?

STRANGER. I will make other arrangements.

MRS. DAWSON. She's in no condition to travel. At least permit her to spend the night. She needs time to get her strength.

STRANGER. [*Ponders, then:*] You may be right.

MRS. DAWSON. She'll bless you for it.

MR. DAWSON. With morning comes the sun.

ACTOR. Not in Baltimore. Not in winter.

STRANGER. You have accommodations?

MRS. DAWSON. We'll find something. We are crowded. The theatre season is on and many of the artists stay here.

STRANGER. What is the name of this inn?

MR. DAWSON. The Raven. I own it lock, stock and cracker barrel. Built with my own sweat.

STRANGER. Odd name for a tavern – "The Raven."

MRS. DAWSON. We used to keep a raven behind the serving table. He lived to be a fine old feathered gentleman. Even our black cat loved him. [*MYSTERIOUS WOMAN moans*]

ACTOR. I think you'd better get her upstairs.

MRS. DAWSON. Yes, yes. By all means.

MR. DAWSON. [*To Actor*] We'll have to take your room.

ACTOR. My room!

MR. DAWSON. You heard Mrs. Dawson. We're full. You're not paid up.

ACTOR. I told you – only a temporary condition.

MR. DAWSON. In that case you can “temporarily” sleep in the kitchen. Cozy and warm in there. You won't suffer.

ACTOR. But the indignity, Mister Dawson. Richard III sleeping in a kitchen?

MRS. DAWSON. [*Helping MYSTERIOUS WOMAN to her feet*] It's a fine room, my dear. I'll get you some hot cider. And broth. I'll soon have you smiling and fit. [*MRS. DAWSON and the MYSTERIOUS WOMAN exit Up Left*]

MR. DAWSON. My wife's a wonder when it comes to nursing.

STRANGER. [*Matter-of-fact*] I'm most grateful for your concern.

MR. DAWSON. [*Thoughtfully*] You can pay?

STRANGER. [*Reaches into a pocket, comes up with coins and slaps them on serving counter*] Will this be enough? [*MR. DAWSON crosses behind serving counter, checks. ACTOR is fuming*]

ACTOR. When that bank draft comes through I shall seriously consider leaving the premises.

MR. DAWSON. [*Unimpressed*] As you say – “when” the bank draft comes through. [*To Stranger*] Now, sir, if you'll be so good as to sign the register. [*MR. DAWSON pushes registry book, quill, and ink pot forward. STRANGER signs his name with a sweeping gesture. MR. DAWSON blots it without looking at the signature. ACTOR sits at table, Down Right Center, turns his back to Stranger and Mr. Dawson, folds his arms in a defiant gesture, mumbles*]

ACTOR. An outrage. [*He picks up newspaper and holds it in front of his face pretending to read but actually trying to conceal his anger*]

MR. DAWSON. Must be pressing business in Washington to have you out on a night like this.

STRANGER. That is my affair. What is the wine of the house?

MR. DAWSON. No wine, sir. Ale and cider. [*Thinks*] Wait a moment . . . there is a bottle. [*Disappears behind serving table, comes up with a dusty bottle*] Here it is. A sailor from a Portuguese ship left it. I thought he'd return, but that was months ago. Perhaps it will do. [*Wipes dust from label, reads*] “Amontillado.”

STRANGER. I'll take it. [*Slaps down another coin*]

MR. DAWSON. The whole bottle?

STRANGER. The whole bottle. [*Slightly sinister tone*] You have some objection?

MR. DAWSON. No, no. None at all. If you wish the whole bottle, it's yours. My trade is renting and selling. [*STRANGER grabs it*]

STRANGER. We shall depart before sunup.

MR. DAWSON. The storm might not be over.

STRANGER. In that case, we travel with the storm. [*STRANGER exits Up Left. ACTOR slowly lowers the newspaper*]

ACTOR. He's a rum customer. What do you make of him? [*MR. DAWSON creeps Up Left, looks off to ascertain that Stranger is gone*]

MR. DAWSON. Quiet. He might hear you.

ACTOR. [*Stands, moves in front of serving table*] "In that case, we travel with the storm." Enough to give one the creeps.

MR. DAWSON. There's nothing creepy about his money.

ACTOR. He could be an escaped lunatic or a murderer. Who knows what?

MR. DAWSON. What he happens to be is a cash customer. [*Returns to behind serving counter, counts coins*] I'm partial to cash customers. They have a certain "quality."

ACTOR. How do you know he won't murder us all in our sleep?

MR. DAWSON. I don't. But, then, how do I know that you won't do the same?

ACTOR. [*Offended*] I am not a murderer. [*With feeling*] I, sir, am an actor.

MR. DAWSON. The critic on the Morning Globe said you murdered Shakespeare.

ACTOR. What do critics know? Ingrates.

MR. DAWSON. [*Indifferent*] If you say so.

ACTOR. [*Conspiratorial tone*] Mark my words, Mister Dawson. I have good instincts when it comes to strangers. [*Points Up Left*] That man is up to something. Something dark, something sinister.

[*Sound of MERRY LAUGHTER from Offstage Right*]

MR. DAWSON. [*Pleased*] The young ladies are back from the theatre. [*THREE GIRLS enter Right. They supply a charming contrast to the darker scene and conversation that preceded their arrival. They wear capes or shawls and attractive bonnets. They shake their costumes in an attempt to dry out. FIRST DANCER takes off her shawl, hangs it on clothes-horse Up Right. Conversation continues through the stage movement*]

FIRST DANCER. We had such good fun walking in the rain, splashing in the puddles like children.

SECOND DANCER. [*Sits on sofa, removes shoes*] My slippers are soaked clear through.

THIRD DANCER. [*Steps to table*] I suspect we'll all catch our death.

MR. DAWSON. The cider's hot. I'll be but a minute. *[He exits Down Left]*

ACTOR. *[Grins]* Not much of a house, I hear.

FIRST DANCER. Almost no audience at all. We might as well have been performing Richard III. *[ACTOR pouts]* We gave a splendid performance all the same, never sang or danced better.

SECOND DANCER. Even got an encore.

ACTOR. *[Surprised]* Encore?

DANCERS. *[Singing]*

Yankee Doodle went to town
Riding on his pony.
Stuck a feather in his cap
And called it macaroni.

[DANCERS laugh and applaud. ACTOR is not impressed]

ACTOR. *[Haughtily]* Some audiences are easily satisfied.

THIRD DANCER. Listen to the vinegar bottle.

ACTOR. You call that an encore? "Yankee Doodle"?

FIRST DANCER. What would you call it?

ACTOR. Prattle. Sound with no fury, signifying nothing. *[DANCERS laugh. They find him pompous, but harmless]*

SECOND DANCER. People like a bit of fun when they come to the theatre.

ACTOR. *[Dramatically]* As artists we should elevate the audience's taste.

THIRD DANCER. I suppose you think all audiences should sit in the theatre and listen to you *[imitating him]* spout Shakespeare.

FIRST DANCER. Badly.

ACTOR. I do not "spout" Shakespeare "badly." I speak it with feeling.

SECOND DANCER. With you "badly" and "with feeling" are the same thing. *[DANCERS laugh again. FIRST DANCER moves downstage. THIRD DANCER sits at table]*

ACTOR. Whales "spout." I am not a whale. I should know better than to attempt a civilized conversation with — *[as if the word tasted bad in his mouth]* — "dancers."

[MR. DAWSON enters from Down Left. He carries a tray with mugs of hot cider. He serves each dancer. Dialogue through the action]

MR. DAWSON. I peppered in a dash of Zanzibar cinnamon. Off the clipper only last week.

FIRST DANCER. You are the thoughtful one, Mister Dawson.

SECOND DANCER. "The Raven" is like home.

THIRD DANCER. You and Mrs. Dawson take such good care of us.

MR. DAWSON. We like people from the stage. Whenever an outsider – who isn't an artist – comes to the door we tell him we're full up. No room. Try "The Gold Bug" down the street.

SECOND DANCER. [*Cup up*] We drink to you and Mrs. Dawson. Long may you reign as keeper of "The Raven"!

FIRST DANCER. Forever more! [*DANCERS sip. MR. DAWSON is pleased, puts tray down where convenient*]

MR. DAWSON. [*To Actor*] Aren't they lovely young things?

ACTOR. [*Snorts*] "Dancers." [*Regally*] I'd as soon rent rooms to singing fish. [*DANCERS react*]

FIRST DANCER. You are out of sorts this evening.

SECOND DANCER. Not our fault you're "at liberty."

THIRD DANCER. Maybe you should give up Shakespeare and learn to dance.

ACTOR. I'd sooner starve.

FIRST DANCER. Why not become a juggler or an acrobat? Acrobats are always in demand.

ACTOR. So are rat-catchers but I don't intend to become one. [*Sighs*] I'm feeling depressed.

SECOND DANCER. [*Teasingly*] Poor, poor man.

MR. DAWSON. I've had to take his room. [*MR. DAWSON takes shawls or wraps from SECOND and THIRD DANCERS, hangs them up on clothes-horse*]

FIRST DANCER. [*Sits at table*] Why?

ACTOR. That's my affair.

SECOND DANCER. We could lend you a few coppers to tide you over, if it's a question of money.

ACTOR. I don't discuss money matters in public. It's vulgar.

THIRD DANCER. She was only trying to be helpful. Artists have to stick together.

MR. DAWSON. Truth of the matter is simple enough. Some poor woman came in from the storm half-dead by the looks of her. She needed a room for resting. [*Nods to Actor*] He'll sleep in the kitchen. [*Steps between sofa and table*]

ACTOR. Like the cat.

MR. DAWSON. I don't have a cat any more.

FIRST DANCER. [*Points to Actor*] You do now. [*All laugh except ACTOR. He turns his back on them. LUCY enters Up Left*]

LUCY. [*To Actor*] I finished upstairs. I've got to hear the end of it. [*Sees DANCERS*] You'll find the beds warm.

THIRD DANCER. Thank you, Lucy. You ~~are~~ the good girl.

LUCY. [*Crosses to table, picks up the newspaper; to Mr. Dawson*]
Do read me the end, Mister Dawson.

MR. DAWSON. You have a taste for the morbid.

LUCY. I don't know what "morbid" is.

MR. DAWSON. [*Picks up newspaper*] Reading about some unfortunate woman who was buried before her time – that's morbid.

FIRST DANCER. [*Excited*] Are you talking about that premature burial?

LUCY. That's it! Yes!

MR. DAWSON. [*Divides the newspaper into two sections*] I'll read the cargo listings and the port news. Here's your bit of the morbid, Lucy. [*He sits on bench Upstage Right. LUCY, with the section containing the burial account, crosses to Actor*]

SECOND DANCER. People in the street were talking about it.

THIRD DANCER. [*Hands to her ears*] I don't want to hear.

LUCY. [*To Actor*] Won't you please read it aloud? [*No response*]
You have such a good voice.

ACTOR. [*Doesn't turn*] A voice that is wasted on the insensitive.
[*LUCY looks terribly disappointed*]

FIRST DANCER. Pay him no mind. Bring it here, Lucy. I'll read it.

LUCY. [*Happy, she crosses to table, hands newspaper to FIRST DANCER, sits at table. Points*] It starts there.

FIRST DANCER. [*Reads, slowly at first*] "The wife of one of our most respected citizens – a lawyer of eminence – was seized with a sudden and unaccountable illness –" [*As she reads STRANGER enters Up Left. He stands, listening for a moment, unobserved. He sits at table Up Left Center*] " – which completely baffled the skill of her physicians. After much suffering she died, or was believed to be dead – "

LUCY. I've already heard that part.

FIRST DANCER. "No one suspected, indeed, or had reason to suspect, that she was not actually dead." [*Chilled, she lowers newspaper*]

LUCY. [*Eagerly*] What comes after that? That's the part I want to hear.

FIRST DANCER. [*Momentarily recovers, reads*] "She presented all the ordinary appearances of death. The face assumed the usual pinched and sunken outline . . ." [*As she reads, her voice becomes solemn and tense. ACTOR, finding the article growing in interest, turns to listen*] "The lips were the usual marble pallor. The eyes were lusterless." [*SECOND DANCER and THIRD DANCER hang on every word, mesmerized. MR. DAWSON becomes interested, too*] "There was no warmth. Pulsation had ceased. The lady was deposited in her family

vault, which, for three subsequent years, was undisturbed. At the expiration of this term it was opened for the reception of a sarcophagus, but a tearful shock awaited the husband, who, personally, threw open the door!" *[Puts down the paper]* I don't know if I want to go on.

LUCY. Oh, please!

FIRST DANCER. I'm not sure I can.

THIRD DANCER. Let me. *[Her aversion temporarily overcome, she takes the newspaper, searches hurriedly for the place where First Dancer left off]* "No warmth . . . expiration . . . sarcophagus . . . fearful shock. . . threw open the door . . ." *[Finds spot]* Here it is. *[With dramatic emphasis]* "As its portals swung outwardly back, some white-apparelled object fell rattling within his arms . . ." *[She's riveted to the print but she can't speak as her eyes follow the printed text]*

LUCY. What was it?!!

SECOND DANCER. You can't stop now!

ACTOR. Go on. Continue.

THIRD DANCER. *[Words almost choking in her throat]* I . . . I . . . I can't . . .

MR. DAWSON. *[Alarmed]* What's wrong?

LUCY. What happened next?

SECOND DANCER. What was at the portals?

THIRD DANCER. *[Her voice betraying terror]* You'll have to read it for yourself. It's too terrible. *[Puts down newspaper]*

STRANGER. Perhaps, if you will permit me?

[All turn to look Up Left Center. STRANGER is standing. He's a most theatrical figure with his cloak and hat, but more striking than this is his manner. Slightly arrogant, distant, compelling. Like some dark magician from another time and place. He moves in front of serving table. As he does, ACTOR quickly moves downstage and, then slips behind the serving table working his way to the Up Left Center table and a seat. He's plainly intimidated by the Stranger]

SECOND DANCER. *[Tentative]* You know something of this case, sir?

STRANGER. I am somewhat of an authority on the subject of premature burial. *[All are taken aback, look questioningly from one to another]*

MR. DAWSON. It's not something they give you a diploma in, is it?

STRANGER. *[Quietly]* No. *[More quiet still]* They do not.

SECOND DANCER. What was it, sir. That . . . "object" . . . inside the vault.