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Dramatic Publishing

THE LONG RED HERRING

A Comedy Thriller

by
PAT COOK



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(THE LONG RED HERRING)

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to Bob Wright...
...with thanks for all his help

THE LONG RED HERRING

A Comedy Thriller in Two Acts
For 2 Men and 6 Women (or 3 men and 5 women)

CHARACTERS

- PROFESSOR KLEINE . . . a slightly stodgy teacher of Creative
Literature, large man in his mid-50s
RUDY MORRELL . . . a brash, know-it-all young man, about 20
MARY JANE BRODY a meek young woman,
always apologizing, 21
KATE DARWELL an upper crust type, very intelligent,
about 20
LYNN BURDETT a pudgy, methodical student, about 21
DIDI TAGGERT a somewhat worldly type, about 20
BOJO MURCHISON a jock, just along for the ride, early 20s
HACKER* a rather military woman, early 20s

*Could be played by a man.

Note: This play takes place at a college. However, the setting could easily be made into a high school simply by lowering the ages of the students by two or three years.

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Professor's Kleine's house.

ABOUT THE SETTING

The setting for this collegiate intrigue is the living room of a somewhat out-of-date house. The walls, though not peeling, give the impression of old paint, covered in places by odd pictures, certificates and diplomas.

There are two practical doors and an archway. The first, or front door, is located Stage Right. The second is located on the Upstage wall and leads to the kitchen. The archway is located on the Stage Left wall. It leads to the rest of the house, such as the dining room, den, etc. A staircase is located on the Upstage wall, just to Stage Right of the kitchen door.

The furniture is a very ordinary, but comfortable collection. The couch, which resides almost Center Stage, is flanked by two end tables. On the Stage Left table rests the telephone. A large chair sets near the couch. A man's jacket is lying over it. There is a large desk located against the Stage Left wall which holds an old portable typewriter. The room is rounded out with various other small tables, bookcases and plants. Also, there is a large blackboard near the stairs.

in the athletic van at 8:00 and then you will be deposited outside my house at about 8:30 p.m. It will be up to each of you to deduce who was murdered, with what and by whom. There is one other thing. Sometimes what you hear and what you think...might conflict with each other. And some things just won't make sense. It will be up to you to decide what is real and what's not. It won't be easy. For, you see, murderers don't play fair. *(He smiles.)* And neither do I. *(He thinks to himself.)* Hm, speaking of why you took the course, today I want you to come up here, each of you, and tell the class your reasons. See what you learned about yourselves. I'd kind of like to hear this myself. Say anything you want, now who's first? *(Lights blackout on KLEINE.)*

ACT ONE

(It is now the following night, around 8:30. Lights come up on the living room. All is quiet for a moment. Then we hear voices outside the front door.)

VOICES. Go on in! What? Open the door, stupid! Look, we haven't examined the outside yet. We can do that later. Maybe we can't. Oh!

(The front door opens easily. DIDI looks in. She is then pushed into the room by RUDY, who follows her in. They are followed by MARY JANE, KATE and then LYNN.)

RUDY. We'll never get this thing off the ground if we hang around outside all night. (*He starts casing the room.*)

DIDI. You know, you're pushy, rude and arrogant.

RUDY. So?

DIDI. I like that in a man.

MARY JANE. You *like* pushy and arrogant?

KATE. Of course she does. Those are her best talents as well.
And you forgot rude.

MARY JANE. Sorry.

KATE (*long suffering*). Stop apologizing, Mary Jane.

DIDI. Did she do it again?

KATE. Like an instant replay.

LYNN. Mary Jane, you don't have to carry the blame for everything, you know. The world is not your fault.

MARY JANE. I know, I'm sorry.

DIDI. Leave her alone. If we screw this up we can always blame her.

KATE. That's a terrible thing to say.

DIDI. Ashamed you didn't think of it yourself?

KATE. Exactly.

(*HACKER enters through the front door, carrying a clipboard.*)

HACKER. Okay, okay, let's not mill around the front door like a group of cattle. (*She moves C.*)

KATE. Herd.

HACKER. What?

KATE. Herd of cattle.

HACKER. Sure, I've heard of cattle. Now...

KATE. No, I mean you said "group" and...

DIDI (*shakes her head*). Don't bother.

HACKER (*looks at clipboard*). First, let's make sure we're all here.

RUDY. We're all here. Are you?

HACKER. Over here. (*She indicates the front of the couch.*)

LYNN. I don't believe this. Suddenly we're in ROTC.

MARY JANE. We better just do what she says.

HACKER (*reads off*). Mary Jane Brody?

MARY JANE. Here.

HACKER. Lynn Burdett?

LYNN. Yes.

HACKER. Kate Darwell?

KATE. Present.

HACKER. Rudy Morrell?

RUDY. Present and accounted for, *sir!*

HACKER. Shut up. Buford Joseph Murchison? (*She looks around.*)

RUDY. Who?

DIDI. Oh, you mean Bojo?

HACKER (*crosses to the front door*). Where is that jock?
(*She opens the door and yells.*) Bojo?!

(*BOJO is standing just outside the door with a cigarette in his mouth. He quickly flicks it away.*)

BOJO. Right here, man!

KATE. You have a woman in the van, Bojo?

BOJO. I was finishing a cigarette, give me a break. (*He joins the others.*)

KATE. You're on the basketball team. You shouldn't be smoking.

BOJO. Season's over.

DIDI. No wonder he had to pay to get in the games.

BOJO. You know what a stickler Professor Kleine is about smoking. I didn't want to get the old man on my back.
(*MARY JANE meekly raises her hand.*)

HACKER. What is it?

MARY JANE. Isn't Professor Kleine going to be here?

HACKER. Sorry. Not allowed to divulge any privileged information. Bojo's here. (*She checks it.*)

RUDY. That's Buford Joseph.

BOJO. Shut up. What, you think when I was born, my parents named me Bojo?

HACKER. And Didi Taggart.

DIDI. Yo!

HACKER. Now, a couple of rules. First, during your investigation of said scene of the crime, you will not, repeat, will *not* tear off any wallpaper, pull up the carpeting or make any long-distance phone calls to Bangkok to get the weather report. Also, a thorough inventory has been conducted so if anything turns up missing, we come and get you.

KATE. At which time we will be beaten senseless.

DIDI. Unless it's Bojo, who's achieved that all by himself.

BOJO. Thank you. Huh?

HACKER. Okay, that's it. I shall return in a couple of hours to pick you up. (*She crosses to the door.*) And don't try to pull any tricks on me like hiding in the hedges or running out in front of the van. I will run over you. Have fun, kiddies. The investigation begins now. (*She exits and closes the door.*)

BOJO. Brother, they let the woman drive a van and she thinks she's Arnold Schwarzenegger.

LYNN. What are we supposed to do now?

RUDY. It's up to you. I know what *I'm* supposed to do. *You're* on your own.

KATE. We begin, dear.

BOJO. Okay, where's the kitchen?

RUDY. Good thinking. You want to check out that room?

BOJO. No, I didn't have supper.

KATE. Okay, kiddies, I think the first rule of business is to look over this room thoroughly.

RUDY. Oh, you're just trying to hog the investigation.

KATE. I simply think, that's all.

DIDI. So does Rudy. He thinks about as simply as anyone.

BOJO. Hey!

DIDI. Sorry, Bojo. Forgot you were in the room. *(To KATE.)*
Why the close examination right off the bat?

MARY JANE. Because later on, some things might disappear.
Some important clues.

KATE. That's right. Very good, Mary Jane. We'll make a detective out of you yet. *(Lights dim in the living room and ALL freeze. A solo light comes up on the lectern as MARY JANE walks over to it and addresses the audience.)*

MARY JANE. When I first saw this course being offered I was afraid. *(She shrugs.)* Sorry. I don't do things on an impulse, I never have, it's just the way I am. Whenever I have to drive somewhere, I plot a map thoroughly before I start the car. If I'm going to see a new movie, I read the book first. If I'm eating at a new restaurant, I only order food that I'm familiar with. Oh, I once tried to change that. I took a course in French, two semesters. Then that summer I went to a French restaurant and, all by myself, boldly ordered a bicycle pump. I apologized in French and left. Once I was set up with a blind date and broke out in hives. I took this course, mainly I think, to prove something to myself. I'm not sure what. You see how it is with me. I was an only child and Dad wanted a boy. Sorry. *(Lights go down on the lectern and MARY JANE joins the others. The*

lights come up in the living room and the action continues.)

DIDI. Okay, sports fans, spread out. *(The GROUP disperses and looks around the area. BOJO inches over to the kitchen door and looks in. Then, making sure no one sees him, he exits through the door. RUDY looks up the stairs. LYNN moves to the desk and finds the cassette recorder.)*

LYNN. This might be something. *(The others move to her.)*

RUDY. What? What is it?

KATE. Ah! A cassette.

LYNN. Should I?

DIDI. Go ahead.

LYNN. Right. *(She reaches into her purse and takes out a pair of gloves. She puts them on.)*

MARY JANE. You've done this before.

KATE. We should've thought of gloves.

MARY JANE. Sorry.

DIDI. Oh, shut up. Don't worry, M.J., we'll take care of you.

LYNN. Ready. *(She delicately presses a button on the player. A recording of KLEINE's VOICE is heard.)*

RECORDING. If you think this is a clue of some sort, you're wrong. Try again. *(LYNN gets a disgusted look on her face and presses the stop button. The RECORDING stops. The rest look at each other and smirk.)*

RUDY. He is a creep when he wants to be.

KATE. Never mind, Lynn. Good try. *(Again the GROUP looks around the room. DIDI finds the man's jacket folded over a chair.)*

DIDI. Look, he left his jacket. Oh! This is probably a clue.

RUDY. Man's jacket? Murderer or victim?

DIDI. Kinda hard to tell from a jacket.

KATE. Hold it up. (*DIDI holds the jacket up to herself. It is much larger than she is.*) Good. Whoever owns this is a large man, over five ten I would say.

LYNN. And rather bulky. I'd say over one eighty at least.

RUDY. Go through the pockets. (*They lay the jacket on the couch and go through the pockets.*)

KATE. Anything?

LYNN (*holds up a red bow tie*). Bow tie.

MARY JANE. Oh. Here's something. (*She takes out a bottle of pills.*) Pills. Prescription says "For Asthma."

DIDI. Who's the prescription for?

MARY JANE. Doesn't say.

KATE. S'that it?

RUDY. So, we know the guy's a geek who can't breathe.

KATE (*gloating*). Oh, is that all you came up with?

RUDY. I suppose you already figured out something?

KATE. Maybe.

DIDI. Oh, tell us. The sooner we get this over, the sooner we get out of here.

RUDY. She doesn't know anything.

KATE. Okay, Mickey Spillane, see how this sounds. Either that jacket is a red herring or it's owner did *not* put it there of his own volition.

RUDY. His own what?

DIDI. Volition. It's a foreign car.

LYNN. Of course. The asthma pills! Whoever has asthma would never let those pills out of their sight. They never know when an attack is coming on.

KATE. Very good. So, they'd keep the jacket on or near them at all times. (*MARY JANE holds up the jacket and looks at it.*)

RUDY. Oh, I probably would've thought of that, if it was important.

DIDI. And how do you know what's important and what's not?

RUDY (*crosses to the kitchen door*). I have a sixth sense about those things. I know what to look for. I know what to expect.

(RUDY flings open the kitchen door and BOJO, standing rigidly, screams and falls forward to the floor. RUDY, LYNN and MARY JANE scream as he tumbles out.)

BOJO (*from the floor*). I was in the neighborhood, thought I'd drop in. (*The lights dim in the living room and come up on the lectern. RUDY walks up to the lectern.*)

RUDY. Ever since I was a kid, I was a born leader. (*He looks around.*) Well, I was! In my sophomore year in high school I was almost voted class president. And I nearly made Eagle Scout with our local troop. Ah, I didn't want it, anyway. Either one of them. Next to the top, that's the best place to be. See, you have to get people to trust you, then you got real power. And, for them to have confidence in you, you have to have confidence in yourself. That's all there is to it. So, I made up my mind I was going to have all the confidence I needed and more. Even when nobody else did. But...they usually did, you understand. And this class? I'm making the best grades. Except for Kate. And Didi. (*Lights begin to dim on him.*) Oh yes, and Lynn. And that foreign exchange kid in the back row...(*Lights fade out on the lectern and come up in the living room. RUDY has resumed his position.*)

KATE (*to BOJO*). Find the kitchen, did you?

BOJO (*gets up*). Yeah, and he doesn't have any beer. The nerve.

DIDI. Beer and cigarettes. You ought to change your major.

BOJO. I would if I knew what it was. Did I miss anything?

RUDY. No.

KATE. Yes. We found a large man's jacket, a bottle of asthma pills and a red bow tie.

BOJO. Red bow tie, that's encouraging.

MARY JANE. And something else. *(ALL turn to look at her. She sticks her finger through a hole in the back of the jacket.)*

BOJO *(appalled)*. You poked a hole in the professor's jacket?

MARY JANE *(drops the jacket on the couch as if it burned her)*. Oh, sorry! *(DIDI and KATE pick up the garment.)*

DIDI. Wait, that looks like...It is!

KATE. Bullet hole. You can tell by the powder scoring around it. Shot at close range.

DIDI. Under two feet, if you ask me.

LYNN. Depends on the caliber of the weapon.

MARY JANE. But...it doesn't make sense.

RUDY. That he was shot in the back?

MARY JANE. No, not that. There's...*(She turns the jacket around.)* Yeah, I was right. There's no blood stains.

BOJO. Ha ha, old Kleiner screwed up.

MARY JANE. You think so?

LYNN. No, wait. What was it he said? What you see and what you think, that part?

DIDI. He said it might not make sense.

MARY JANE. Maybe this was what he was talking about.

KATE. It is his kind of detail.

RUDY. Maybe his jacket was removed just after he'd been shot.

LYNN *(pointedly)*. Who's jacket?

KATE. Good point. Now, remember that we're supposed to use our prior knowledge in this investigation, right? And we've all seen Professor Kleiner wear this jacket.