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*Dramatic Publishing*

# Murder at the Prop Table



Farce  
by  
Ed Bassett

# Murder at the Prop Table

**Farce. By Ed Bassett. Cast: 3m., 2w., 1 either gender.** As the saying goes, “All the world’s a stage,” and it couldn’t be more true of a group of actors living life as though it were part of a play ... oh wait, it is ... is that in the script? Did he really just do *that*?! Stars of the stage and screen, Alex and Lynn are unhappily married; Alex loves Jane, but Jane is Herbert’s girlfriend; and Herbert wrote the play that Alex and Lynn are starring in with hopes of making a triumphant comeback to the stage. Add in a confused gardener and a stage manager trying to keep things in order, and you have a recipe for disaster with a dash of love, a sprinkle of loathing, a splash of suspicion and one dead body. And the critics are in the audience. *Interior unit set.* *Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: MP9.*

Cover: Phoenix Stage Company, Naugatuck, Conn.,  
featuring (l-r) Heather Graham and Chris Evans.  
*Photo: Sharon A. Wilcox. Cover design: Susan Carle.*

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# Murder at the Prop Table

A farce in two acts by

ED BASSETT



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*Murder at the Prop Table* was performed as part of the Short and NEAT Festival in 1997 and won the Connecticut Playwright Project in 2007. It received a workshop and full production performance at the Phoenix Stage Company in Naugatuck, Conn., in 2013, direction and sound design by Ed Bassett with stage management by Lori Poulin.

Cast:

Alex .....	Chris Evans
Jane .....	Kate Samberg
Lynn .....	Heather Graham
Herbert .....	Jim Buffone
Hal .....	Timothy Cleary
Stage Manager .....	Brian Elser

# Murder at the Prop Table

## CHARACTERS

JANE: The young girlfriend of the playwright. Our props mistress. She dreams of becoming an actress.

ALEXANDER PUDDINGTON (Reginald): A has-been stage star. He is his own biggest fan with a history of backstage affairs.

LYNN PUDDINGTON (Miss Penny): Alexander's wife. Also a has-been stage star, pretentious.

STAGE MANAGER: A character.

HERBERT (Mr. Canfield): The playwright and co-star of his play being debuted.

HAL: The gardener and more.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

This is a play within a play. Alexander, Lynn and Herbert are playing characters in a murder mystery happening “onstage”—there are several scenes in which characters look “out” the UC window. When doing so, they should be in performance in the play taking place behind the set.

This play is set backstage, behind the set of a production. There is a window UC, flanked by a door on each side. There is a door leading off L and another leads off R. The L and R doors could be left as hall entries. A prop table sits DC in front of the large window. A dressing screen sits DR.

Canned audience laughter, applause and response should be added where the director sees it appropriate.

# Murder at the Prop Table

## ACT I

### SCENE 1

AT RISE: *ALEXANDER PUDDINGTON*, a man in his 40s, dressed in gentleman's attire, and *JANE*, a young attractive woman, stand at the prop table. *ALEX* and *JANE* are in a passionate embrace. The entire exchange seems horribly overacted.

JANE. Oh, Alex. I can't tell you how you make me feel.

ALEX. Try, Jane. Try.

JANE. I couldn't possibly. *(She turns her back to him.)* Words can't express the effect you have on me.

ALEX. You're a talented actress, Jane. Try ... *(He embraces her from behind.)*

JANE. Alex, I'm the props mistress.

ALEX. Today, maybe, but someday I'll make you a star, now ... *emote* for me.

JANE. Oh, Alex ... you know how it drives me mad when you use those theatre words.

ALEX. Emote.

JANE. Oh ...

ALEX. Motivate.

JANE. Oh ...

ALEX. Improvi ... sate.

JANE. OH! *(She turns to him, and they begin to kiss passionately.)*

*(LYNN PUDDINGTON, a woman in her 40s, dressed as a sophisticated lady of the house, enters L carrying a copy of the script. She stands and watches the exchange before interrupting. She speaks with a British accent.)*

LYNN. Well, isn't this charming.

ALEX *(startled but cool)*. Oh ... hello Lynn, darling. Jane was just helping me rehearse a scene.

LYNN. Indeed. But I don't recall a scene like *that* in this show. *(She flips through the script.)*

ALEX *(taking the script from her)*. It's a scene I'm thinking of adding.

LYNN. Well, Alex, darling, since I am the leading lady in this production, I would think you would rehearse this charming new scene with me. Wouldn't you think so, Jane?

JANE. Well, I ... I mean, I ...

ALEX. Actually Lynn, dear, the scene just came to me while I was standing here looking at my props, a stroke of genius.

LYNN. A stroke of something, although I'm not sure genius is the word I'd use to describe it. I'm sure that Herbert would be interested in seeing the addition. *(JANE reacts.)* After all, he *is* the author.

ALEX. Yes, and I *am* the producer. You'll do well not to forget that fact.

LYNN. A threat?

ALEX. A reminder.

STAGE MANAGER *(offstage)*. FIVE MINUTES!

ALL. Five, thank you.

LYNN. Jane, sweetie, it seems I have forgotten my clutch bag in the dressing room. Would you be a dear and fetch it for me?

JANE. You don't use a clutch bag.

LYNN. I do now (*Glaring at ALEX.*) I've just added it. Be a dear and go get my bag, will you?

JANE. Yes, of course. (*She glances at ALEX and exits L.*)

LYNN. How dare you?!

ALEX. How dare I?!

LYNN. You heard me, you lothario.

ALEX. Lynn, darling ...

LYNN. Don't "darling" me. I will not have you tramping about this set acting like some King of Beasts marking territory. It will do you well to keep in mind that *I* made you and *I* can break you.

STAGE MANAGER (*offstage*). THREE MINUTES!

ALL. Three, thank you.

ALEX. Jane was helping me spice up a rather dull scene ... it was nothing less and nothing more.

LYNN. I have little doubt that it was nothing less, and I have *no* doubt that it was *EVERYTHING* more! I will *not* tolerate you flaunting your adulteries as if they were a colorful necktie.

STAGE MANAGER (*offstage*). TWO MINUTES!

(*They both look at their watches.*)

ALL. Two, thank you.

ALEX. I cannot believe that you, for one minute, think that I would be guilty of such an act, let alone do it before the gaze of the very love of my life.

LYNN. Save it for the critics, Alexander.

(*HERBERT enters from the R door. A young man, he is dressed in a tweed suit, rather nerdy in appearance. He is very nervous.*)

HERBERT. Did I hear someone say critics? Are there critics here tonight? Which ones? What if they ...?

LYNN. Herbert! Dear boy, calm yourself. Critics are a part of this business. Think of them as your friends and you'll feel much better about them.

HERBERT. Maybe you're right.

STAGE MANAGER (*offstage*). ONE MINUTE!

ALL. One, thank you.

HERBERT. What if they don't like the play?

(*JANE enters from the L door and hands a clutch bag to LYNN.*)

JANE. What if who doesn't like it?

HERBERT. The critics.

JANE. Critics?! Are there critics here? TONIGHT?!

ALEX. Everyone calm down. We've no idea who may be out there, and it doesn't matter. I'm the producer, and I like the play. That's all that matters.

HERBERT. Well ...

STAGE MANAGER (*offstage*). PLACES!

HERBERT. OH GOD! Where are my glasses? Jane, where are my glasses?!

JANE. They're right here (*She retrieves them from the prop table.*) Honey, calm down.

HERBERT. I am calm, but ...

LYNN. Dear boy, trust me. You'll be fabulous. Your public awaits a brilliant performance and with me by your side, how can you go wrong?

(*LYNN and HERBERT exit through the UR door. As she passes, LYNN throws the clutch bag onto the prop table.*

*Audience applause is heard.*)

JANE. Oh, Alex. I don't know if I can stand it.

ALEX. Easy, my dove, she doesn't suspect a thing.

JANE. What? Who doesn't suspect what?

ALEX. Lynn.

JANE. Lynn?

ALEX. My wife. She doesn't suspect a thing.

JANE. I'm talking about Herbert.

ALEX. Herbert? Does Herbert know?!

JANE. Does Herbert know what?

ALEX. About us.

JANE. Oh, God no.

ALEX. What then?

JANE. What if there *are* critics out there? What if they don't like his play?

ALEX. Jane. Darling Jane. Always thinking of others. If there *are* critics out there, I'm sure they will love this play.

JANE. I guess you're right.

ALEX. Of course I'm right. I'm the star. They've *got* to love it.

*(They embrace. The drapes in the UC window open, and we see HERBERT. He pauses and stares. The drapes whip closed.)*

JANE *(breaks the embrace and looks at ALEX)*. Oh, thank you, Alex. Thank you for starring in Herbert's play.

ALEX. You have such a sparkle in your eyes. Like the bright shining bulbs that spell my name across the marquee.

JANE. Oh, Alex.

ALEX. Jane ...

JANE *(breaking away)*. Herbert is lucky to have you.

*(LYNN enters from the UL door.)*

LYNN *(to off)* One moment, Mr. Canfield. *(To ALEX.)* What is going on back here?

ALEX. What ever do you mean?

LYNN. I mean, I've been trapped out there with that quivering bag of nerves for the last three paragraphs, waiting for you to make your grand entrance. You can trust me when I say that, although a brilliant playwright, improvisation is not one of Herbert's strongest talents. YOU'RE ON!

ALEX. GOOD GOD! I've never missed an entrance in all my years of performing.

LYNN. There's a first time for everything.

*(ALEX fumbles about the prop table. He grabs a tobacco pipe and a newspaper and exits through the UR door.)*

JANE. Oh no. I've ruined everything.

LYNN. Ruined what, dear?

JANE. If I hadn't been talking to him, he wouldn't have missed his entrance.

LYNN. Pay no attention to the verbal spewage of Alexander the great. He has missed more entrances that I can *begin* to count.

JANE. But he just said ...

LYNN. He *says* a lot, dear, but means little.

JANE. Are you calling him a liar?

LYNN. No. I wouldn't call him a liar. I *would* call him an egotistical, loathsome, self-fulfilling, backstage gigolo.

JANE. How can you say those things about him? He's a wonderful man.

LYNN. Stay married to a man like that for as long as I have, and the rose tint eventually fades off the glasses, young lady.

JANE. Alexander is a *great* actor and a very important producer. He's going to cast me in the starring role of his next play.

LYNN (*feeling JANE's forehead*). Oh, you've got it bad, don't you? Not to worry. This too shall pass.

JANE. What do you mean?

LYNN. This happens to every bright-eyed starlet of every show produced by Alexander. You have been wooed into a web, which has been years in the making.

JANE. But, he said that ... and that I ... and he was ... (*She begins to cry.*)

*(LYNN extends her arms out to JANE, who crosses in, and they embrace. LYNN comforts her. The drapes of the UC window part, and we see HERBERT. He stands shocked and stares at the women. The drapes are whipped closed.)*

ALEX (*loudly from offstage*). I said, I wonder who that could be at the door?

*(The UL door opens a bit, and ALEX stretches his arm out, grabs LYNN and pulls. She fights his grasp, reaches out and takes a basket of flowers off the prop table. She stumbles backwards through the door, and the door slams.*

*Audience laughter is heard.)*

HERBERT (*loudly from off*) Ah, Miss Penny ...

ALEX (*from off*). I'll get a new bottle of sherry and return momentarily.

*(JANE stands alone, sobbing, her back to the audience. ALEX enters from the UR door and crosses to the prop table.)*

ALEX. Jane, where's the bottle of sherry?

JANE (*angry*). Don't speak to me.

ALEX. Jane, darling, what's wrong?

JANE. Don't call me darling, you ... you ... *(With a British accent.)* lothario.

ALEX. Ah. You've been "chatting it up" with Lynn, haven't you?

JANE. I can't believe that you would lead me on this way. Is it true? Were you really saying all those things to me just so I would sleep with you?

ALEX. Jane, everything I said to you was true. Lynn is a jealous, has-been starlet wife, who would go to any lengths to win back the adoration of her still famous and powerful husband.

JANE. She lied?

ALEX. Well, I don't know if I'd say ... yes. She lied.

JANE. But, she's British.

ALEX. What? ... She's from Idaho.

JANE. Idaho? But she has an accent.

ALEX. Oh that. She's been talking like that ever since she played the lead in an Agatha Christie play 10 years ago. I don't even remember the name of it. It bombed, as did she.

JANE. Oh, Alex. I'm sorry. Can you forgive me?

ALEX. Consider it done. And I do love you, young Jane. Young, beautiful Jane.

*(JANE embraces ALEX as the curtains in the UC window open, and LYNN stands looking out. She appears enraged and whips the curtains closed.)*

ALEX *(breaking away)*. Now, where's the sherry? I believe I have an entrance.

JANE. Oh! I was filling the bottle, and I think I left it on the counter near the sink. I'll be right back. *(She exits R.)*

HAL *(entering L)*. Alex, have you seen Jane?

ALEX. She's getting my bottle of sherry. Can I help?

HAL. I'm having trouble with by back pad. It has to be centered just right, or Lynn will stab me for real.

ALEX. We wouldn't want that to happen, now would we? Poor Lynn would be whisked off to jail for life. *(He ponders.)*

HAL. Yeah, sure. Anyway, can you help center it for me?

ALEX. Of course.

*(HAL steps up to ALEX. He attempts to straighten the pad under HAL's shirt from behind. Having no luck, HAL turns to face ALEX, and ALEX reaches around and behind him. He is tugging on the pad and on the straps with no luck.)*

ALEX *(cont'd)*. This isn't working. I need to get under your shirt.

*(HAL unbuttons his shirt. ALEX now places both hands under HAL's shirt and reaches behind him to straighten the pad. As they struggle, JANE enters and sees the men. She ducks behind the dressing screen R.)*

ALEX. You're quite muscular, aren't you?

HAL. I work out a little.

ALEX. It shows.

HAL. Thanks.

*(As they continue to straighten the pad, the drapes in the UC window open, and we see LYNN looking out the window. She appears shocked and amused. The drapes close slowly. ALEX finishes with HAL.)*

ALEX. There. I think you're straight.

HAL. Thanks, Alex. *(He winks at ALEX and exits L.)*

JANE *(coming from behind the dressing screen)*. Here's your sherry.

*(JANE raises the bottle to strike ALEX. He grabs the bottle and takes it from her.)*

ALEX. Thank you.

*(JANE is left standing at the prop table as ALEX exits UL with the bottle. HAL enters L.)*

HAL. Oh, there you are. Jane, I couldn't find you earlier, so I asked Alex to straighten my back pads. We're all set. OK then. I'm off to die! *(He exits UL.)*

*(JANE is left standing at the prop table. HERBERT enters UR and crosses to her, putting his hand on her shoulder.)*

JANE *(bringing the hand to her cheek)*. I'm sorry I doubted you. Say you forgive me and that you really do love me.

HERBERT. Doubted me? Of course I love you, but ...

JANE *(turning to him)*. HERBERT! ... Oh ... *(She faints.)*

*(HERBERT catches her and lays her on the prop table. He bends over her, grasps her shoulders close around her neck and begins to shake her, calling her name. The drapes of the UC window part, and we see ALEX peering out. He sees the action at the prop table and appears shocked. The drapes whip closed. HERBERT picks JANE up and carries her off R. The drapes open again, and we see LYNN. She looks out the window, turns left and then right, and the drapes close. Lights down.)*