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Dramatic Publishing



MURDER ON CENTER STAGE

A Full Length Play

by

JERRY L. TWEDT



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(MURDER ON CENTER STAGE)

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MURDER ON CENTER STAGE
A Full-Length Play
For Three Men and Six Women

C H A R A C T E R S

HELEN BLESTAR . . *head of the theatre department*

ALICE

TERRY

MIKE

SHARON

DAVID

. *students*

MISS SHOTWELL *instructor in the English
department*

JESSICA *janitor for the theatre*

MR. STANLEY *head janitor for Fine Arts
Building*

PLACE: *The stage of an old theatre.*

TIME: *A winter evening.*

ACT ONE

SCENE: The theatre of a private Liberal Arts College.

The set on stage should consist of a partially completed setting for Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." There should be arches, platforms and pillars suggesting a street scene. There is a candelabra and candles on stage, as well as a place where all the characters keep their coats. There should also be a ladder, a lighting panel, a sound cabinet, and a sheet or drop cloth. There is a telephone on the sound cabinet. The stage should look as any stage does when a set is half completed. It is important that there be enough flats so that a person can move around backstage and not be seen by the audience or the actors on stage.)

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: We see the Director, HELEN BLESTAR [MRS. "B"/], an attractive woman in her early fifties, on stage. With her are two college girls: ALICE, who is playing the Nurse; and TERRY, who is playing Mrs. Capulet. HELEN looks around the stage.)

HELEN. Can't anything go right? Where is Sharon?

ALICE. She was just here.

TERRY. Where's David?

HELEN. Good point, Terry. If you find one, you'll find the other. I knew it was a mistake to cast those two as Romeo and Juliet.

TERRY. But think how realistic the love scenes will be.

HELEN. True. But only if they don't wear themselves

out backstage! (All three laugh.)

(MIKE, a college boy, comes down the lighting ladder R.)

MIKE. Mrs. "B"?

HELEN. What is it, Mike?

MIKE. There's something screwy with a couple of those lights. They don't plug in like the others.

HELEN. Don't worry about it. I'll have the tech director check them tomorrow.

ALICE. The ghost strikes again!

TERRY. What ghost?

MIKE. That's right, you're new. You haven't heard about our famous ghost.

ALICE. Nobody's seen it, but a lot of people have heard it.

MIKE. At night, when the theatre is empty, all sorts of sounds have been heard . . . crying, laughing . . . it's weird.

TERRY. Is that true, Mrs. "B"?

HELEN. Terry, every theatre I've been connected with has had its ghost.

MIKE. This one's real!

ALICE. Some say it's the spirit of a girl who died on stage.

HELEN. No one ever died on this stage!

ALICE. Frances Brown told me that . . .

HELEN. I don't care what she told you. It's not true.

MIKE. But you've heard things, too. I know you have.

HELEN. This is an old theatre inside an old building. There are bound to be creaks and groans. Stop talking about ghosts and go study your lines.

MIKE. I'll practice my dueling!

HELEN. You don't hear very well, do you, Mike?

I said practice your lines.

ALICE. You'd better do as she says or she'll use her karate on you.

MIKE. That's right! I can see it now! College Theatre Director becomes black belt champion of the world!

HELEN (coldly). Please, Mike. All I'm doing is taking a self defense course at the "Y". Go study your lines!

MIKE. Yes, ma'am. (MIKE exits R. HELEN turns and shouts off stage L.)

HELEN. Sharon! Sharon Wise!

SHARON (offstage). I'm coming! I'm coming!

ALICE. Let her go, David!

(SHARON runs on stage from L. She is a pretty girl of about nineteen. On top of her jeans she is wearing a long wrap-around skirt. She is just finishing putting a safety-pin in the skirt.)

SHARON. I wasn't with David! The safety-pin broke on this stupid skirt!

TERRY. Sure! Tell us another one.

SHARON. It's the truth! Oh, Mrs. "B", I'll never learn to walk in this thing!

HELEN. Well, I'm sorry, Sharon, but girls in Sixteenth Century Verona didn't wear bluejeans. Come on, it's almost ten o'clock. Let's try and salvage something from this rehearsal.

ALICE. Where shall we start?

HELEN. Act One, Scene Three. The Nurse and Lady Capulet are on stage. Juliet, you'll enter from upstage left.

SHARON. Right. (SHARON runs to the UL area. MIKE exits.)

HELEN. Walk! Learn to walk!

SHARON. Yes, ma'am.

HELEN. All right. Try and put some feeling into it.
TERRY.

Nurse, where's my daughter? Call her forth
to me.

ALICE.

Now, by my maidenhead at twelve years old,
I bade her come. What, lamb! What, ladybird!
God forbid! . . . Where's this girl? What,
Juliet?

(There is silence. SHARON is supposed to enter
but is day-dreaming.)

What, Juliet!

(Still silence.)

HELEN. Sharon! That's your cue! Do we need to
send an invitation?

SHARON. Oooooops! Sorry. (HELEN shakes her
head.)

HELEN. Say your last line again, Alice.

ALICE.

Where's this girl? What, Juliet!

(SHARON enters almost on a run.)

HELEN. Walk!

SHARON. Yes, ma'am.

How now! Who calls?

ALICE.

Your mother.

SHARON.

Madam, I am here. What is your will?

TERRY.

This is the matter. . . . Nurse, give leave
a while,

We must talk in secret . . . Nurse, come
back again;

I have remember'd me, thou's hear our
counsel.

Thou know'st my daughter's of a pretty age.

ALICE.

Faith, I can tell her age unto an hour.

TERRY.

She's not fourteen.

ALICE.

I'll lay fourteen of my teeth . . .

And yet, to my teen be it spoken, I have but four . . .

She's . . .

(At this point, DAVID and MIKE enter R, dueling with swords. DAVID also is a college student.)

MIKE.

Turn thee, Benvolio, look upon thy death!

DAVID.

I do not keep the peace: Put up thy sword,
Or manage it to part these men with me.

MIKE.

What, drawn, and talk of peace! I hate the
word

As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee!
Have at thee, coward!

(HELEN throws up her hands.)

HELEN. Enough! (DAVID and MIKE stop dueling.
HELEN glares at them.)

DAVID. Sorry, Mrs. "B".

MIKE. We were just practicing.

HELEN. You were showing off! I thought you were
beyond that. Leave those swords here and go
study your lines.

DAVID. Yes, ma'am.

(DAVID and MIKE turn to exit as MISS SHOTWELL
enters. She is the same age as Helen and teaches
English at the college. She is wearing a heavy
winter coat with a large fur collar.)

MIKE. Hi, Miss Shotwell.

MISS SHOTWELL. Mike . . . David. (MISS SHOTWELL crosses to HELEN.) Brrrr, what a night! It's turning into a regular blizzard.

HELEN. Grace! What are you doing here?

MISS SHOTWELL. What am I . . . ? Good heavens, Helen, that's what I want to know!

HELEN. I don't understand.

MISS SHOTWELL. Your message! When I returned home from the faculty meeting there was this urgent message for me to come to the theatre.

HELEN. I sent no message.

MISS SHOTWELL. Well, then who . . . ?

SHARON. Someone's played a trick on you.

MISS SHOTWELL. Of all the . . . Roger Bell! That's who did it! I flunked him last semester in English Literature!

HELEN. I'm sorry, Grace. Did you walk over?

MISS SHOTWELL. No . . . I took a cab.

HELEN. I'll drive you home. We're almost finished.

MISS SHOTWELL. You are finished. Jessica is on her way.

HELEN. Oh, no! That's all I need.

MISS SHOTWELL. You have no one to blame but yourself. You're the one that keeps her around.

HELEN. Someone has to help the poor thing.

MISS SHOTWELL. She should have been put in an institution years ago.

HELEN. She's harmless.

MISS SHOTWELL. I'm not so sure. She seems to be getting worse. I brought my Shakespeare class over yesterday and she almost didn't let us in!

HELEN. She was probably cleaning.

MISS SHOTWELL. She's always cleaning!

SHARON. She cornered me this afternoon and spent half an hour explaining all the things I'm doing wrong with Juliet.

MISS SHOTWELL. Oh, she's an expert on Juliet!

HELEN. I don't think she's ever forgiven you for winning that role.

MISS SHOTWELL. There's no need to tell me!

She's hated me from that day to this.

MIKE. Was she ever any good as an actress?

HELEN. Yes. And before her breakdown she was brilliant. So, let's be a little kind. This theatre is her whole world.

MISS SHOTWELL. I still say that she . . . (There is some noise offstage R.)

HELEN. Shhhhh!

(JESSICA enters from R. She is a woman in her mid-fifties, but looks older. She is wearing an old shapeless dress and is carrying a mop and bucket.)

JESSICA. Helen! Helen! Have you seen this mess back here?

HELEN. Now, Jessica. We're building sets.

JESSICA. That's no excuse! This place is filthy!

It'll take me two hours to clean the stage alone!

DAVID. Then don't clean it.

JESSICA. Don't you get smart with me, young man!

I have a college degree! That's more than you have!

DAVID. Yes, ma'am.

JESSICA. And I acted on this very stage! Didn't I, Helen?

HELEN. Yes, you did. (HELEN motions for DAVID to be quiet. JESSICA notices MISS SHOTWELL.)

JESSICA. What are you doing here?

MISS SHOTWELL. It's too long to explain.

HELEN. Jessica, it's a terrible night. Forget about cleaning and let me take you home.

JESSICA (excitedly). No! I can't do that! The

theatre is a mess! The theatre is a mess!
The theatre must be clean, Helen! It must be
clean! It must be clean!

HELEN. All right . . . all right . . . you clean.
But I want you to take a cab home. (JESSICA
regains control of herself.)

JESSICA. Yes . . . yes, I'll do that. (JESSICA
looks at SHARON, then back to HELEN.) Was
she better tonight?

HELEN. Yes, I think she was.

JESSICA. I thought she would be. I talked to her.
(JESSICA looks at MISS SHOTWELL, then to
SHARON.) And don't pay any attention to what
she says!

MISS SHOTWELL. Now, you see here, Jessica . . .

(MR. STANLEY, the head janitor for the Fine Arts
Building, comes charging in from the back of
the theatre. He is a grumpy man in his mid-
fifties.)

MR. STANLEY. Jessica! Where is it? Where's my
mophead?

JESSICA. It's mine!

MR. STANLEY. No, it's not! I saw you come out of
my supply room!

JESSICA. I was looking for my pail! The one you
stole!

MR. STANLEY. You left it out! One of my boys
tripped over it! (MR. STANLEY reaches into
Jessica's pail and pulls out the mophead.)

JESSICA. Give that back! (MR. STANLEY turns to
HELEN.)

MR. STANLEY. You know the rules!

HELEN. I know the rules, Mr. Stanley. Jessica
takes care of the theatre and you are in charge
of the Fine Arts Building.

MR. STANLEY. And she has her supplies and I have mine!

HELEN. Jessica, is this Mr. Stanley's mop?

JESSICA. Well . . . he has four more and I don't have any!

MR. STANLEY. Then order some!

JESSICA. But I need it tonight!

HELEN. Mr. Stanley . . .

MR. STANLEY. Oh, she can have it!

HELEN. Thank you.

MR. STANLEY. Ahhh! That crazy old woman should be put away.

JESSICA. You can't talk to me like that! I have a college degree!

MR. STANLEY. So you've told me ten thousand times. If you're so smart, how come you're cleaning floors?

JESSICA. I . . . I . . . (Pause.)

HELEN. She does much more than clean floors. She assists me and I consider her help invaluable.

JESSICA. Yes . . . that's right. I'm Helen's assistant. Well, I am not going to stay here and be insulted by a janitor! (JESSICA exits R.)

HELEN (shouting after her). Make sure you take a cab home! (HELEN turns to MR. STANLEY.) That was cruel, Mr. Stanley.

MISS SHOTWELL. It really was!

MR. STANLEY. You three stick together. You always did. Well, you don't have to work with her. She isn't any better than me, yet she acts like the Queen of England!

MISS SHOTWELL. I think he's just jealous of how well Jessica keeps this theatre.

MR. STANLEY. Of course, praise her! She has one small theatre to take care of. My boys and I have three floors! We don't get so much as a thank you! (To HELEN.) I'm telling you,

Mrs. "B", she should be put in an institution!

HELEN. Jessica is harmless.

MR. STANLEY. She's just plain crazy! Mark my words!

HELEN. I've had enough for one night! Turn off the lights, David. (HELEN grabs her coat and begins to put it on. DAVID starts for the lighting panel, L. The others prepare to leave.)

MR. STANLEY. There is one thing I should tell you. I know who your famous ghost is.

DAVID. You do?

HELEN. There is no ghost.

MR. STANLEY. Yes, there is. I've seen it.

MISS SHOTWELL. Oh, come on now!

MR. STANLEY. If you don't believe me, just wait around.

SHARON. It . . . it'll be here tonight?

MR. STANLEY. Yes.

HELEN. How do you know?

MR. STANLEY. I know.

MIKE. Who is it?

MR. STANLEY. You'll find out. Pretend to leave, then come back and wait awhile. It won't be long. (MR. STANLEY begins to exit up through the audience.)

HELEN. Mr. Stanley . . .

MISS SHOTWELL. Aren't you staying?

MR. STANLEY. I've seen it. Some of us have to work for a living. (MR. STANLEY exits.)

HELEN shakes her head.)

HELEN. And he talks about Jessica being crazy!

MIKE. Wait a minute! What if he's right?

HELEN. You don't believe those old ghost stories!

DAVID. At least let Mike and me stay.

SHARON. Not without me, you don't!

ALICE. I want to stay, too!

HELEN. I think you've all gone crazy! (All of the young people, except TERRY, plead with HELEN.) All right! All right! What about you, Terry?

TERRY. I . . . don't know.

ALICE. Oh, come on! Don't be a party pooper.

MIKE. Yeah, it'll be fun!

TERRY. Well . . . okay.

HELEN. Are you sure, Terry? I'll take you home.

TERRY. No. I'll stay.

MISS SHOTWELL. So will I.

HELEN. Grace!

MISS SHOTWELL. Don't look at me like that! After all, I've heard about this ghost for the past fifteen years.

HELEN. Oh, what's the use. We'll all stay. (The young people cheer.) We might as well sit down.

DAVID. No! We have to pretend to leave.

HELEN. David . . .

MIKE. He's right!

ALICE. We want to make sure the ghost comes.
(All the young people agree.)

HELEN. Do I have to put on my coat?

SHARON. Sure! It's cold outside. (They all laugh and grab their coats.)

DAVID (loudly). Let's wrap it up!

MIKE. I'll get the lights.

HELEN. Leave the work lights on for Jessica.

ALICE. No! The theatre needs to be dark.

HELEN. I always leave the work lights on for her.

ALICE. Not tonight!

HELEN. Oh, yes! I won't have her falling down and hurting herself. (The lights dim.)

TERRY. Ooooo, it's sort of spooky already.

DAVID (loudly). Man, will I be glad to get home!

HELEN. Why are you talking so loudly?

DAVID (stage whisper). I want to make sure the

ghost hears us go.

HELEN. Oh, come on! (They all begin to exit, R.)

ALICE. Is our lit test going to be hard, Miss Shotwell?

MISS SHOTWELL. Not if you've studied the material.

ALICE. That's what I was afraid of. (They all laugh. As they leave the stage they continue to talk.)

HELEN. No books tomorrow for Act Two. Is that understood? (There are a lot of groans.) I mean it! We're a week behind on this play as is.

MIKE. Have you ever thought of buying some teleprompters like they have on TV?

HELEN. As a matter of fact, yes! And if I get one, I'll hang it right around your neck! (They all laugh.) Good night and be careful getting back to the dorms.

(Everyone says good night, after which there is a door opening and slamming shut. There is a pause, then the characters quietly re-enter the stage.)

SHARON (stage whisper). What now?

DAVID (stage whisper). We wait.

HELEN. Why are you whispering?

DAVID. I don't want the ghost to hear us. (They all laugh.)

MISS SHOTWELL. You know what's going to happen? Jessica will come in and spoil everything.

ALICE. Oh, you're right.

HELEN. Without a doubt. I suggest we really go.

MIKE. No! Let's give it a shot.

DAVID. Yeah! Who knows? We might even see a ghost!

TERRY. I hope not.

SHARON. Don't be such a chicken.