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Dramatic Publishing

No Crime Like The Present

A Full-Length Play

By
BILL GLEASON



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(NO CRIME LIKE THE PRESENT)

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NO CRIME LIKE THE PRESENT
A Full-Length Comedy
For Six Women, Seven Men and Extras*

C H A R A C T E R S

MAVIS DAVIS private eye
MAX. her musical soulmate
SLACK homicide detective
BRONSKI his female partner
LUTHER PRESTON newscaster at T.V. station KDOA
CASSANDRA DUMONT another newscaster
STAN VAN the weatherman
JENNIE ABBOT consumer reporter
JIMMY BIG sportscaster
MILES HARTLEY station manager
EVERETT NELSON mayor
MRS. BIG organized crime matriarch
OLGA ZAATZ gypsy

TIME: The present.

PLACE: In and around the KDOA television station.

*Reporters, cameramen, a drummer.

ACT ONE

AS HOUSELIGHTS FADE: We hear the sound of a muted trumpet playing something sultry. MAX, the trumpet player, enters DR as stage lights come up UC to reveal the news desk at KDOA Television. MAX wears an outfit that resembles a 1940's zoot suit – baggy pants, long jacket, suspenders and floppy fedora. He has an enormous handkerchief which he uses to wipe his face. A backdrop reads, “KDOA Action News Central.” Stage left of backdrop is National Weather Map with assorted symbols on it for rain, snow, etc. MAX continues to play his trumpet softly. MAVIS DAVIS enters L. She wears a feminine suit that has seen better days. An overcoat is tossed over her shoulder and her tie is loosened at the neck. She crosses to the news desk and gestures to encompass it, then addresses the audience.

MAVIS (cool, slick, tough). The scene of the crime. (Offstage rim-shot on drum. MAX stops playing.) Murder one. (Rim-shot.) The biggie. (One more rim-shot.) Seems like everybody was watching the news the night Cassandra Dumont got her contract cancelled – permanently. Media murder. (Trumpet tag.) Hot stuff. (Trumpet tag.) Everybody from the mayor on down was fighting for a piece of the limelight. All the bigshots wanted to voice their outrage. There were reputations to be made and low profiles were dropping like hot potatoes. (Several thuds from the offstage drum. MAVIS throws her coat on the desk and sits on the edge of it.) The

cops were playing their usual game, "Motive, motive . . . who's got the motive." That made it difficult in this case because everybody hated Cassandra Dumont. She was on her way to the top and was willing to step on a few toes to get there. Most everybody she came in contact with walked away with a limp. (MAX plays as MAVIS crosses to weather map and gets pointer. She uses it like a pool cue on the news desk, taking imaginary shots.) Motive . . . Cops cling to the obvious. (She takes a shot, watches. Trumpet plays a fading note, culminating in a rim-shot as imaginary ball falls in.)

MAX. Nice shot.

MAVIS. Thanks. (She lines up another.) Cops love a good motive because it's comfortable. Me? I don't work that way. I like to look under rocks. The truth ain't dancin' around like some vaudeville yo-yo with a light bulb on his head singin' "Here I am, baby!" No! Most of the time it's crawling round under a rock. And that's where I look. (Takes another shot. Same routine.) So, I get my hands dirty. But I get answers. You get enough answers . . . case closed. (She crosses DC, conspiratorially.) The real key, of course, is to understand human nature, which I do. You see, there are two types of people in this world, divided equally by a shaft. (Gestures with pointer.) Some are giving it . . . the rest are getting it. (Trumpet squeals. She crosses back to news desk.) Which leads me to my philosophy of life. It is better to give than to receive.

MAX (singing a la Louie Armstrong). Ohhh yeah!

MAVIS (putting down pointer). The name is Davis. Mavis Davis. I'm a private eye. I've seen a lot of crime in my time, from the petty to the profound. But there's no case like a new case . . . and there's no crime like the present. (Throws overcoat on shoulder.) And, at present, the crime in question is the murder of one Cassandra Dumont, the girl everybody loved to hate. (She crosses R as MAX begins to play.) It was a

Friday. Jack Frost was biting faces outside, but inside the studio, the air was hot with evil intentions. Cassandra Dumont was about to make her last, and most memorable, newscast. (MAVIS and MAX exit.)

(Immediately, stirring music comes up and the recorded sound of clattering typewriters that usually introduces the evening news. However, this music is more profound than most, Wagnerian in import. Lights come up high on news desk and fade elsewhere as the Action News Team enters – CASSANDRA, LUTHER, STAN, JIMMY and JENNIE. We sense the tension right away as CASSANDRA and LUTHER move to their central positions. STAN moves to his weather map, JIMMY to the sports desk and JENNIE to her consumer desk. The music continues. JENNIE is giving CASSANDRA cutting looks while CASSANDRA smiles smugly. JENNIE can't restrain herself and with a scream charges CASSANDRA, as if to pull her hair out. CASSANDRA doesn't move and LUTHER and STAN restrain JENNIE, pulling her back to her place. JENNIE struggles briefly, then stops.)

LUTHER. Control, Jennie. Control! It's almost air time. Sure, we have our differences, but we're supposed to be professionals. There are thousands of ignorant people out there, who are depending on us . . . on you . . . to tell them what they don't want to hear. Remember that.

CASSANDRA. Why don't you sit down and shut up, you oafish air-bag. If she wants to act like some hysterical teenager, let her. (LUTHER starts angrily toward CASSANDRA and is restrained by JIMMY.)

LUTHER. If I weren't a gentleman . . .

CASSANDRA. I know. I know. You'd throttle me. Sit down and be a good boy, Luther. And don't trip on those apron strings.

STAN (meekly). Must you be so abrasive, Cassandra? I mean, we're all in this together.

CASSANDRA. Is Stan developing a spine? How unlike him. (She looks at his weather map.) Hate to tell you, Stan. It's snowing outside. (STAN looks, changes sun for snow sign on map.)

STAN. Thank God for satellites.

CASSANDRA (tired sigh). I'm surrounded by bimbos.

VOICE (offstage, omniscient, over music). And now, from Channel Five's Action News Desk, the Action News Central News Team, with all the news that is the news.

LUTHER (to CASSANDRA). You'll never get away with it.

CASSANDRA. We'll see.

VOICE (offstage). News that affects you and all you do. News from afar and news that's close to you. Good news, bad news, happy and sad news, but always . . . the news. And now, from the Action Five News Desk, the Action News Central News Team with . . . the news. (Music fades, now it's all smiles and cooperation on the news desk.)

LUTHER. Good evening.

CASSANDRA. And good news. I'm Cassandra Dumont.

LUTHER. And I'm Luther Preston bringing you the latest in developments from the Metroplex.

CASSANDRA. Washington and the world.

LUTHER. From us.

CASSANDRA. To you.

ALL. The news.

LUTHER. Our top story tonight — Scandal rears its ugly head.

CASSANDRA. Outrage grows over the new State Senate Disco. Is it a legitimate place for legislators to wind down after a lengthy filibuster?

LUTHER. Or just another taxpayer rip-off where state officials boogie down while taxpayers pay the piper.

CASSANDRA. We'll also be hearing from our consumer reporter, Jennie Abbot.

JENNIE. Wake up, America. The time is now. I thought I had heard it all, but no! Once again, the innocent consumer is getting the you-know-what from you-know-who. (She holds up a box.) Look familiar? That's right. Prunes. If you ever ate one, ever thought about eating one, or know somebody who does, then don't miss my report – The Prune Conspiracy, coming up later on Action News Central. Back to you, Cassandra.

CASSANDRA. I ate a prune once.

LUTHER. I did, too. And, who knows? I might eat one again some time.

JENNIE. Then you owe it to yourself to watch my report, The Prune Conspiracy. Back to you, Luther.

LUTHER. Back to you, Cassandra.

CASSANDRA. And on the weather scene . . . Woolen undie time, Stan?

STAN. You can say that again, Cassandra. Old Jack Frost is tearing into town like a manic-depressive motorcycle jockey. I'm talkin' bad news in a leather jacket. You even step out of the house and he's gonna stomp you good. So, lay chilly, folks. I'll be back with a complete weather wrap-up later on Action Central News. Back to you, Luther.

LUTHER. Is that cold weather going to affect the NBA playoffs, Jim?

JIMMY. Probably not, Luther. They'll be playing indoors.

CASSANDRA. And for the latest on the greatest – in sports, that is –

LUTHER. The man with more scores than Burt Reynolds, Jimmy Big.

JIMMY (laughing). Just kidding, Burt . . . I'll have the latest NBA scores, a rare film clip that shows Muhammed Ali with his mouth shut, and an Action Sports inside report on where old hockey pucks go to die. (CASSANDRA sips on a glass of water.) Back to you, Cassandra. (CASSANDRA makes a face, looks at water glass.)

CASSANDRA. These and uh . . . (She shakes her head.) These and . . . other . . . (The others look at her.)

LUTHER. What Cassandra meant to say was . . . these stories and more, when Action News continues. Right, Cassandra? (CASSANDRA rises, grabs her throat, makes growling noise and falls over the desk.)

LUTHER (feeling for a pulse, looking up). Tragedy struck today, when Cassandra Dumont died mysteriously in the middle of a newscast. Film at eleven.

VOICE (offstage). Cut! (Lights out. The news props are removed and props for Mavis' office are brought on in the darkness.)

(Light comes up, DR. We hear the muted trumpet again as MAVIS enters.)

MAVIS. It didn't take the cops long to find out what killed her. Somebody had put enough cyanide in her water glass to kill most of Bolivia. They put their best man on the case, Sergeant Slack from homicide. He's tough. They call him "no slack" Slack. They had plenty of suspects, but Luther Preston was at the top of the list. Like I said, Cassandra stepped on a lot of toes. But Luther Preston had the worst limp. (Lights up UC to reveal Mavis' desk and two chairs. She crosses to her desk.) It didn't take Luther long to show up at my office. (She sits and props her feet on desk.)

(LUTHER enters L, looking worn and worried.)

MAVIS. He looked like they had really put him through the wringer. Luther Preston was one scared newscaster.

LUTHER. Mavis Davis?

MAVIS. Bingo.

LUTHER. I'm sorry, Miss Bingo. I thought this was Mavis Davis' office. (He turns as if to leave.)

MAVIS. Not so fast, twinkle toes. This is Mavis Davis' office.

LUTHER. Is she in?

MAVIS. You're looking at her.

LUTHER. You're Mavis Davis?

MAVIS. Bingo.

LUTHER. I expected someone . . . older.

MAVIS. And wiser?

LUTHER. Perhaps.

MAVIS. Don't let my youthful good looks fool you. I've been around the block more times than a crooked cabbie.

LUTHER. That's nice to know.

MAVIS. What can I do for you?

LUTHER. My name is Luther Preston.

MAVIS. I know. I've seen your show.

LUTHER. I think I'm in trouble.

MAVIS (pointing to chair). Take a load off, Luther. Let's talk.

LUTHER (sitting). I know I'm in trouble.

MAVIS. So who isn't? Trouble is a shadow dancer, Luther. And it foxtrots behind us all. Why'd you come to me?

LUTHER. I made some inquiries. Your name kept coming up. They say you're good.

MAVIS. Sometimes.

LUTHER. They say you never give up.

MAVIS. It goes against my grain.

LUTHER. They say you're cheap.

MAVIS. I'll pretend you didn't say that.

LUTHER. I meant reasonable.

MAVIS. Low overhead.

LUTHER. Will you help me?

MAVIS. Tell me about it.

LUTHER (breaking down). They think I did it. They think I killed her. I know they do. They kept after me. All those questions. I was confused, upset. I even sounded guilty to myself. But I didn't do it! You have to believe me.

MAVIS. You got a lawyer?

LUTHER. Yeah. He tells me not to worry about a thing. But that detective . . . Slack. He's got this look in his eye. I've seen that look before. That look means trouble. He thinks I did it.

MAVIS. Did he say so?

LUTHER. Not in so many words. But when I told him I was innocent he called me a lying meatball.

MAVIS. That's Slack all right. Never minces words.

LUTHER. He's an animal.

MAVIS. So tell me. Did you kill her?

LUTHER. Heavens, no! I told you. I wouldn't . . . I couldn't. Cassandra and I were friends, associates. We shared a great respect for each other. Why would I kill Cassandra?

MAVIS. Because you hated her guts. Because she was more popular than you. Because you were madly in love with her until she dropped you like a newspaper with puppy-puddles on it and started dating the station manager, your best friend, Miles Hartley. Because she was working on Miles to get you canned. How's that for starters?

LUTHER. So our relationship was stormy. So what?

MAVIS. Motive, baby. The cops only need one to hang this on you, but you're a walking catalogue. You got motives coming out your ears. It's Christmas day at the police station and you're the perfect present under the tree – wrapped, taped and tied with a card that reads “open me first.” (LUTHER covers his face, sobs.) Don't play games with me, Luther.

LUTHER (sobbing). Can't you see I'm upset? When Cassandra died, a little piece of me went with her.

MAVIS. Yeah, your heart. She tore it out by the roots when she left you. And you couldn't get it back because she was using it for a doormat. She used you, Luther. She had you like a four-course meal. First your pride, then your ego, your self-esteem and even your manhood. And after she took everything you had to give she dumped you like day-old spaghetti.

It cut you deep, Luther.

LUTHER. She loved it. She loved to see me crawl.

MAVIS. And to add insult to injury . . . Miles.

LUTHER. My best friend.

MAVIS. Your ex-best friend. Cassandra saw to that.

LUTHER (sobbing). Oh, yes. Oh, yes. That was the last straw.

MAVIS. And she loved every minute of it, didn't she, Luther?

LUTHER (rising). I had planned a lovely dinner. (He crosses

DC.) All her favorites — Spaghettios, garlic bread and salad with anchovies. She had seemed distant to me. A gulf was growing between us and I had hoped that this dinner would bring us back together. (He doodles over imaginary table.) Nice. No . . . Perfect. Red roses, her favorite. And the wine . . . chilled to perfection.

CASSANDRA (offstage). Luther?

LUTHER. In here, darling.

(CASSANDRA enters into DC area.)

CASSANDRA. Sorry I'm late.

LUTHER (gesturing to table). What do you think?

CASSANDRA. Nice.

LUTHER. Nice? I've been slaving over a hot stove all day and all you can say is . . . nice?

CASSANDRA. We have to talk, Luther.

LUTHER. Can't we eat first?

CASSANDRA. You won't want to hear what I have to say on a full stomach.

LUTHER. This sounds serious.

CASSANDRA. I remember when I first came to KDOA. I was just a silly little kid, with a head full of rainbows. I thought that if I was greedy and grasping enough, if I stabbed enough people in the back and used my body, I could get ahead . . . And I was right. I never once hesitated to hurt somebody if it meant a step up the ladder for me. I used every dirty trick

in the book and every book in the library. I knew in my heart — and I know this may sound stupid and sentimental — I knew in my heart that if I was completely self-serving and deceitful, I could shaft my way to the top. (A childish laugh.) I remember when I was getting on the bus in Boise to come to the big city. Mom pushed some feeble old lady out of line so I'd get the last seat available. And as I was getting on the bus, Mom gave me one of those cute little needlepoint things to hang over my bed. You know what it said, Luther?

LUTHER. Let me guess. "Today is the first day of the rest" —

CASSANDRA. No. It said, "Do Unto Others First." And that's what I've done. I want to thank you, Luther.

LUTHER. Thank me?

CASSANDRA. These last few months with you have been some of the most important in my young life. This whole relationship has been a proving ground for me. For some reason I thought that the guys who had made it to the top were different than the other little creeps I stepped on every day. But now I know that you're no different than the rest. You proved that celebrities are just as silly and stupid as the regular folks. If I could use you, then I could use anybody. (She smiles.) And that makes me feel good.

LUTHER. Well, I'm glad to know that there was more to our relationship than just . . . passion.

CASSANDRA. Yeah. (She smiles.) Well, enough of this . . . soapy sentimentality. I bet you thought I was going to gush on all night.

LUTHER. Don't be silly. Come on. Let's eat.

CASSANDRA. I'm afraid I'll have to pass, Luther.

LUTHER. Pass? But we had a date. Everything is ready.

CASSANDRA. I've got a date.

LUTHER. A date! With who?

CASSANDRA. Miles. We're going to the mayor's house for dinner. Everyone who's anyone is going to be there. A pity you weren't invited.