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A ONE-ACT PLAY

The Charge is Murder

BY

LUELLA McMAHON



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(THE CHARGE IS MURDER)

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THE CHARGE IS MURDER

A Play in One Act

For Five Men and Five Women, or Variations*

CHARACTERS

JUDGE

BAILIFF

JEFFREY [or JANET] YORK *Prosecutor*

MICHAEL [or MICHELLE] BURNS *Defense Attorney*

ROBERT LINDON *the Defendant*

MAYME EVANS *Twelfth Juror*

DWIGHT CALSTED *a student*

SOPHIA GOLDEN *a landlady*

WILLIAM JORDAN *a police officer*

JOHN [or JOAN] RILEY *a professor*

COURT REPORTER (no lines)

PLACE: *A courtroom.*

TIME: *June. The present.*

*If desired, John (or Joan) Riley and/or lawyers or judge may be played by women.

NOTES ON CHARACTERS
AND COSTUMES

All in modern costume according to character.
None is extremely high-styled.

THE JUDGE: Ogden Wills is about fifty years old;
stern but fair. Wears Judge's robe.

JEFFREY YORK: The Prosecutor is forty-five,
forceful and sure.

MICHAEL BURNS: The Defense attorney is twenty-
seven. He is well dressed, less experi-
enced but capable.

ROBERT LINDON: The defendant is nineteen years
of age. He is dressed as a typical college
student. He is hostile, doesn't trust many
people.

MAYME EVANS: Mrs. Evans is forty-five, highly
nervous. She wears a suit.

DWIGHT CALSTED: The witness is twenty-six,
likable. He is casually dressed.

SOPHIA GOLDEN: The landlady is fifty-five, con-
servative, a bit "snoopy," inclined to
offer her opinions. She wears a summer
dress.

BAILIFF: He is middle-aged, wears a dark suit.

WILLIAM JORDAN: He is about forty. He wears
police uniform.

JOHN (or JOAN) RILEY: The Professor of Psychol-
ogy is in his [her] mid-thirties, and is
sympathetic to Robert. He [she] dresses
well.

COURT REPORTER: She is young, dressed for
business office, quietly efficient.

STAGE CHART

Witness
Chair

Judge's
Bench

Chair
Table

Defense Attorney's
Table

State Attorney's
Table

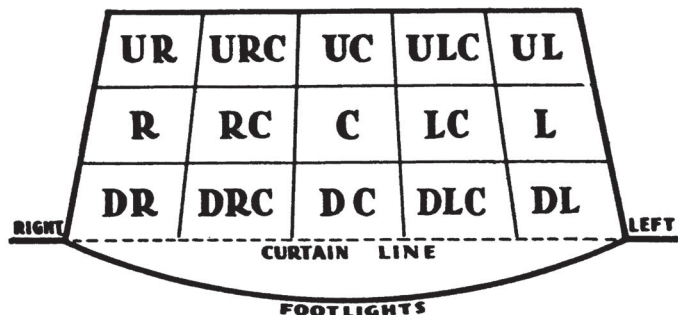
PROPERTIES

GENERAL: A typical courtroom with law books, Bible, pictures, flag, etc. Judge's Bench, witness chair, court reporter's chair and table, tables and chairs for defense and prosecuting attorneys.

YORK: Knife, letter.

JUDGE: Gavel.

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, *downstage* means toward the footlights, and *right* and *left* are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means *right*, L means *left*, U means *up*, D means *down*, C means *center*, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for *up right*, RC for *right center*, DLC for *down left center*, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the *Chart of Stage Positions*. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

The Charge is Murder

SCENE: A typical courtroom with law books, pictures, flag, etc. The judge's desk is UC. The witness box is RC. The court reporter is LC. The prosecuting attorney's table is DLC. The defense table is DRC.)

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: ROBERT LINDON, the accused, is seated at the defense table. He looks defiant. The attorneys, YORK and BURNS, are C arguing over the seating of the twelfth juror, MRS. MAYME EVANS, who is at witness stand.)

YORK. It doesn't make any difference.
BURNS (almost simultaneously with YORK). It most certainly does. When one objects so thoroughly to being on jury duty . . .

YORK (breaking in). Many people object to being on jury duty, but it doesn't make them incompetent.

JUDGE (rapping gavel). Gentlemen! Gentlemen! You have spent a great deal of the State's time in picking this jury. Please complete it.

YORK. The State accepts this juror.

BURNS. And the Defense would accept, but she is not willing to serve.

JUDGE (turning to MRS. EVANS). Mrs. Evans, have you any prejudices against the defendant?

MRS. EVANS (darting a nervous glance at the defendant). No--oh, no . . . your Honor.

JUDGE. And will you swear to decide on his guilt or innocence to the best of your ability and knowledge?

MRS. EVANS (very nervous). Of course, your Honor.

JUDGE. Then take your seat with the other jurors.

MRS. EVANS. But, your Honor . . .

JUDGE (sternly). Take your seat as the twelfth juror unless you wish to be held in contempt of court.

(MRS. EVANS, with another nervous look at the defendant, goes to the jury box as the people in the courtroom watch intently. If desired, the jury may be presumed to be in front row of the auditorium. In this case, only the twelfth juror is necessary. If jury is on stage, juror twelve must show reaction from time to time.)

JUDGE. Since it is early in the day, and so much time has been consumed agreeing on a jury, we'll begin this trial immediately if the counselors are ready.

YORK. The State is ready, your Honor.

BURNS. The defense is ready, your Honor.

JUDGE. Mr. York, you may proceed.

YORK (facing jury). Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have been selected from among the people of this city to try this defendant, Robert Lindon-- for murder-- murder without a modicum of so-called extenuating circumstances-- murder in the first degree. It is charged-- and we shall prove-- that on May 18 between eleven and eleven-thirty P.M., as the victim, Marcia Pierce, was walking through Lake Park on the way home from a late

University session, this man of violent temper stabbed her to death. The defense will try to gain your sympathy by attracting your attention to the youth of this criminal--barely nineteen. He'll point out that the defendant has no family and is alone in the world. But I say if he is old enough to commit this crime, he's old enough to go to prison for it. There are many people alone in the world, but they do not take out their frustrations on innocent people; they do not carry death-dealing knives; they do not commit murder! Thus neither this trial nor any opening statement need take long. I shall call only three witnesses to the stand. These three will show without a question that the defendant is guilty of murder in the first degree. Thank you. (He sits at the prosecutor's table.)

JUDGE (to BURNS). You may present your case.

BURNS (rising and facing the jury). Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the State's Attorney is breaking the first law of justice. A person is always innocent until proved guilty. The State's Attorney is declaring my client guilty without even a trial.

Now we are going to admit several things. We admit my client has a quick temper. We admit that he sometimes acts first and thinks afterwards. We admit that he has been known to assault other individuals. But, ladies and gentlemen, who of us is without fault? Some of us may be over-proud. Does this mean we would break the law to enhance our ego? Others of us may have a desire for wealth. Does this mean

we would destroy to further our own ambitions? Still others may, like Robert Lindon, have a quick temper. Does this mean we would murder? Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Robert Lindon, like all of us, has his shortcomings, but there are a few other things that you should know about him.

At an age when most boys' chief concern is getting the family car for the evening, Robert Lindon was, and is, facing and accepting the responsibilities of a man. He was, and is, paying his way through the University by working to supplement a small trust fund left to him by his parents--and receiving outstanding grades. And doing this, he still finds time to coach a sandlot baseball team and these boys will tell you he emphasizes honesty and fair play. Does this sound like the actions of a man of violence, the behavior of a criminal, the philosophy of a killer? You know it does not, ladies and gentlemen, just as you will know that the evidence to be offered is all circumstantial--far from conclusive--and in no way proves the charge of murder.

Ladies and gentlemen, Robert Lindon does not ask, or need, your pity or your sympathy. All he asks, or needs, is justice and a fair hearing. Therefore, it is with great confidence that I place in your hands the fate of my innocent client, Robert Lindon. (Returns to table.)

JUDGE. In the absence of the Clerk of Court, the bailiff will swear the witnesses in. The State may now call its witnesses.

YORK. Your Honor, since Dr. Jules Martin couldn't be here, I have his statement that the blood found on the defendant matches the blood of the victim. May I offer this as Exhibit B and this knife as Exhibit A.

JUDGE. Whose knife is it?

YORK. The defendant's, your Honor.

JUDGE. Does the defense agree?

BURNS (after looking at knife). Yes, your Honor.

JUDGE. So admitted.

YORK (placing document and knife on Judge's desk).
Thank you.

JUDGE. You may call your witnesses.

YORK (to BAILIFF). Please call Police Officer William Jordan.

BAILIFF. Officer William Jordan, please come to the stand.

(JORDAN comes up from audience.)

BAILIFF. Raise your right hand. (JORDAN does so.)
Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

POLICE OFFICER. I do.

BAILIFF. Please be seated. (POLICE OFFICER sits.)

YORK (getting knife from Judge's desk). Is this the murder weapon?

POLICE OFFICER. It is, sir.

YORK. Where was it found?

POLICE OFFICER. In the bushes near the scene of the murder.

YORK. How did you determine that the knife belonged to the defendant?

POLICE OFFICER. By the address found on the newspaper that the knife handle was wrapped in.

YORK. What about the fingerprints?

POLICE OFFICER. They were too smudged to pinpoint. They seem to belong to the defendant.

YORK. How did the police get the blood samples?

POLICE OFFICER. From the defendant's clothing, but that may not be entirely conclusive. The defendant's blood is the same type as the victim's. It's the most common type, type O.

YORK. But his hand had been cut?

POLICE OFFICER. Yes, sir.

YORK. Could it have been by the knife?

POLICE OFFICER. It could have been.

YORK. The defendant says he cut his hand on barbed wire when he jumped over a fence in the park. Is that possible?

POLICE OFFICER. It could be, if he pulled his hand, to make a gash.

YORK. But you found no evidence of blood at the spot on the fence that he indicated?

POLICE OFFICER. No--but it was an exposed area. There was an early morning shower which could have washed the blood away.

YORK. How did the newspaper around the knife remain dry?

POLICE OFFICER. It was protected by the heavy bushes. It wasn't entirely dry.

YORK. Dry enough for you to see the address, however.

POLICE OFFICER. Oh, yes--very clearly.

YORK. Going back to the fence for a moment--isn't blood hard to wash away when it's dried?

POLICE OFFICER. Yes, that's true.

YORK. Then, isn't it odd that not a trace was left?

POLICE OFFICER. Yes, I suppose it is.

YORK. Thank you, that's all. (To BURNS.) Your

witness. (Goes to his table.)

BURNS (rising, from table). But you agree that the rain could have washed the blood away completely.

POLICE OFFICER. Yes, I agree to that.

BURNS. Thank you--that's all. (Sits at table.)

JUDGE (to POLICE OFFICER). You may step down. (To YORK.) Call your next witness.

YORK. Call Mrs. Sophia Golden.

BAILIFF. Mrs. Sophia Golden . . . (No answer.)

JUDGE. Is Mrs. Sophia Golden in the court room?

SOPHIA. Here, sir.

(SOPHIA comes up from audience.)

BAILIFF. Raise your right hand. (SOPHIA does as told.)

SOPHIA. Yes, sir.

BAILIFF. Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

SOPHIA. I do.

BAILIFF. Take the stand.

SOPHIA. Yes, sir. (SOPHIA sits. Throughout the testimony, the defendant sits sullen and disinterested.)

YORK. Your name?

SOPHIA. Mrs. Sophia Golden.

YORK. Your occupation?

SOPHIA. I rent rooms to college students.

YORK. Do you know the defendant?

SOPHIA. Yes, sir.

YORK. How?

SOPHIA. He is one of my tenants.

YORK. What is your opinion of him?

SOPHIA. Well, I . . . (BURNS breaks in.)

BURNS. Objection. The counselor is calling for an opinion.