

Foul Play At Fotheringhay



A Dinner Theatre Murder Mystery

By Jane Morris



Morris Murder Mysteries



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(Customer Taster)

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Tomorrow will be Laura's 70th birthday and her 3 sons have arranged a treat. The family has rented a cottage, Castle Hall House, in the picturesque village of Fotheringhay. They plan to spend the weekend together, exploring the history of the area. The hall at Fotheringhay Castle was the scene of the trial of Mary Queen of Scots in 1586 and the scene of her execution in February 1587. Some may say she had committed treason – others may say she was murdered. But that trial is history now – there is another case to solve tonight. One of tonight's characters will be the subject of Foul play at Fotheringhay.

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Foul Play at Fotheringhay

About this pack

The full version of this pack should provide everything you need to produce your very own murder mystery event.

This pack is intended to be used at a sit down meal where the principal characters will act out a set of events for the assembled guests.

This pack is, in part, a **scripted performance**; the cast have set lines to learn, which contain the information the audience need to work out whodunnit - if they are thinking clearly enough! If your actors are confident enough, some **improvisation** may be worthwhile to include the audience in the scene, allowing for audience participation (either prompted by the actors, or provided in an impromptu fashion by the more boisterous members of the audience!). There is also opportunity to **interact with the audience** between the first scripted scene and the final scene in which the murderer is revealed.

For playing in front of a large audience, the actors will know the solution and will have rehearsed the improvisation and the final scene.

It could also be played such that the actors are also “participants” in the events, and the solution is not known to them in advance. In this case the final scene cannot be rehearsed, and the actors will need to read the final scene in front of the audience. In this case, it is assumed that “the organiser” will also be a participant, playing one of the characters - hence there are various indications that the organiser should avoid looking at some of the documents in advance of the event!

Structure

The full murder mystery pack contains:-

- The Organiser’s Overview (this document!)
- The Main Scene (to be distributed to the individual characters before the event)
- “Solutions sheets” for the audience to enter their solutions
- The Final Scene, in which the murderer is revealed. (For a “large audience” event, this should be part of the cast’s preparations. For an event where the actors are also “participants” in guessing the identity of the murderer, this should be withheld until after the participants have entered their solutions.)

This taster includes:

A **Plot Overview**.

General Staging Notes on how best to plan and stage your Murder Mystery event.

Overview of the Characters with descriptions for your actors to expand upon.

An excerpt (about 30%) of the main scene.

Plot Overview

Laura Murray is turning 70; her three sons – David, Simon and James Murray – have rented Castle Hall Cottage in Fotheringhay to celebrate her birthday. The area is steeped in history, as it was the place where the trial and execution of Mary, Queen of Scots was held.

James and Simon arrive first, with their wives – Davina and Carole – and Simon and Carole's teenage son, Craig. James, Carole and Simon start decorating the room, whilst Craig slouches in a chair and Davina starts on the first of many drinks. David and his wife Anne arrive next, bringing Laura with them. The atmosphere is jovial but, as dinner approaches, Davina gets increasingly drunk and begins snapping at her husband and irritating most of the family.

The power fails and Mary, the housekeeper, arrives with emergency supplies. She also brings some books and pamphlets about the local area. Davina and Craig read about the ghostly history of the hall and decide to play a prank on the other guests. Whilst they are upstairs finding white sheets, Davina staggers and falls, as if she's seen a ghost, and dies.

In the final scene, the ghost of **Mary, Queen of Scots**, appears – although she was not the ghost Davina saw! The other characters confess their feelings about Davina – and each other – and each is revealed to be the potential murderer:

- **Craig** is worried his 'ghost' prank may have backfired and frightened the life out of his aunt;
- **David**, who is an MP, is receiving a lot of bad press about his alleged involvement in criminal activity. He thinks Davina might have leaked the information to the press, and wanted to get even.
- **Anne** begins to wish she had married James, since her own husband has been shamed in the press and James is writing a book – attractive to her as the secretary to a publishing company. With David's attention distracted by the press, Davina is the only obstacle between her and James;
- **Carole** and **Simon** are worried about Davina's influence over their son, and may have used Simon's research drugs to slip Davina an overdose;
- **James** has suffered his wife's sarcasm and bullying too long. She would not help out his business when it began to fail, even though she had received a substantial amount of money from a recent inheritance. She is stifling his creativity, thinking his attempts to write a book are pointless, but he has just had the news that he has inherited the family's disease from Laura, and this may have been the last straw;
- There may be more to housekeeper **Mary** than meets the eye, as she has keys to the hall, and has been insulted by Davina from the minute she arrived. It turns out, however, that Mary is Davina's estranged birth mother, and only wanted to talk to her...
- **Laura** was fed up with seeing Davina spoil the lives of her three boys – ruining David's career, James's livelihood and Simon's son.

General Staging Notes

Running the script in front of an audience

Note that you need to purchase a performance licence from the Murder Mysteries page of the Lazy Bee Scripts web site.

Preparation

Initial preparation can be done by distributing the opening scene, then running a first rehearsal in which the actors have to guess the identity of the murderer before they see the script for the Final Scene. (It's fun! Why not?)

After that, the cast need to learn the dialogue, develop character and get comfortable with the (improvised) interrogation.

Consider:-

- Developing more detailed “background briefs” for each character, elaborating background, but not changing any of the plot points. This allows the actors to accommodate more irrelevant questions from the audience!
- Developing “get-out strategies” so that an irrelevant line of audience questioning can be curtailed. (This can, for example, be direct “that has no bearing on the case”, jokey “I couldn't possibly answer that without my lawyer present” or via an interruption which introduces a new line of questioning from the character brief.)
- Giving “seed questions” to the audience. (This could be done as “hearsay” briefs, or “police lines of enquiry”)

Decide on the format for declaring the winner.

Open the event by acting out the scripted dialogue.

Interrogation

In this scene, the remaining characters should be allowed to mingle with the audience and interact with them. Of course, the characters are going to be acting shocked – someone has just died! – but this is a vital time for the audience to draw their conclusions about who the murderer was. Actors can flesh out their characters here by mentioning details that are not explicit in the script, or reiterating anything the audience may not have fully grasped the first time around.

“Whodunnit” sheets may be discreetly passed around the audience at this point, and discreetly collected again before the final scene takes place. Alternatively, these could be handed out and filled in during the dessert course of the guests' meal.

Mary, Queen of Scots may be introduced with this scene, at the discretion of the performers and producers. She could be glimpsed entering one door, quickly crossing the room, and leaving again. This would hint at the possibility that Davina has *really* seen a ghost, and will give the actor playing Queen Mary a chance to interact with the guests instead of hiding backstage for the final scene!

Solution

Act out the final scene.

There may be an option to read out some of the (more bizarre) audience solutions!

Declare the winner.

Award a prize to the best solution! (And possibly a prize for the worst.)

Running the script with the actors as “participants”

Note that you need to purchase a performance licence from the Murder Mysteries page of the Lazy Bee Scripts web site.

Preparation

Distribute the Main Scene to each actor

Rehearse the scripted opening scene

Each actor should prepare his or her own background brief but the discussion at rehearsals should be limited!

Decide if the cast are allowed to interrogate one another during the event!

The person taking the murderer’s part will not know from the opening script nor the character profile that they have committed the crime. Their identity will not be revealed until the script for the final scene is distributed during the event!

Open the event by acting out the scripted dialogue.

Interrogation

Open the interrogation to the audience. This needs to be done in front of the whole audience.

Of course, the characters are going to be acting shocked – someone has just died! – but this is a vital time for the audience to draw their conclusions about who the murderer was. Actors can flesh out their characters here by mentioning details that are not explicit in the script, or reiterating anything the audience may not have fully grasped the first time around.

“Whodunnit” sheets may be discreetly passed around the audience at this point, and discreetly collected again before the final scene takes place. Alternatively, these could be handed out and filled in during the dessert course of the guests’ meal.

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Solution

Distribute the final scene amongst the actors. (Ideally this should not have been seen by the organiser beforehand, therefore if it cannot be printed during the event, it should be printed and put in an envelope by a trusted third party before the event!)

Read/Act-out the scene.

Break (whilst the audience continues to eat and drink) to review the solutions.

There may be an option to read out some of the (more bizarre) audience solutions!

Declare the winner.

Award a prize to the best solution! (And possibly a prize for the worst.)

Facilities required for the performers

The performers need a separate private room for their use. They will use this prior to the event to get changed and prepared and will use the room during the event where they can exchange notes and discuss any change of tactics. The murder victims will also use this room once deceased!

Recommended event format

The evening works best if structured round a sit down meal. If the event is being staged in a hotel this may be a formal served multi-course meal, but if this was being staged in a hall or private venue you could lay on a simpler meal or even a table buffet. However guests should have a table to sit at to watch and enjoy the action.

Pre-dinner drinks

Before moving to the seated area, we recommend pre-dinner drinks. This gives an opportunity for the guests to mingle and more importantly to meet the characters informally before the action begins.

Dining area:

Top table: set for 9 places, used by the principal characters. Positioned in a central location so that all the other guests can see the action. Ideally a clear area in front of this table should be provided to give space for the actors to perform freely.

Tables for the other guests. Depending on facilities and space it is recommended that the tables are spaced to give room for the actors to move around and between them and so be able to interact with the guests.

Although structured around a meal, there is no predefined timing for the action and the courses. If this is a restaurant based event then the serving staff should just be instructed to serve the courses as normal and not wait for any events / action (this saves upsetting the chef!).

As a broad guide your event should run as follows:

7.30 to 8.00	Meet and greet, Pre-dinner drinks
8.00	Sit down and starters served.
8.15	Opening scene.
8.35	Davina's death is announced. Main course served.
9.00 to 9.20	Improvised scene with audience interaction.
9.25	All sit again. Desserts served.
9.40	Final scene.
9.50	Prize giving and coffee!

Improvisation

As already explained, there is a set script for this Murder Mystery scenario. Your performers are encouraged to improvise dialogue around it if they are confident. There is also an opportunity, between the opening scene and the final scene, for an additional scene in which the characters can mingle with the audience and interact with them. This will display interactions and behaviour based on their back stories and knowledge of the plot and their interpersonal relationships. This is not as daunting as it sounds! Your performers need to get into character and remain in character throughout. All conversations with guests should be as the character they are playing.

If serving pre-dinner drinks, you are bound to get some comments about 'who dies first?', 'are you the murderer?' at the start of the evening. The trick is to act confused and surprised! What are they talking about? This is a special occasion!

If guests start asking you questions that you don't know the answer to then you can simply make excuses and walk away or steer the conversation in a different direction.

You don't have to admit your feelings outright, but can hint at your relationships with the other characters, make passing comments about your reaction to something to trigger a response and a question.

The most common difficulty is when someone slips up and gives the wrong info from their back story (and guests will sometimes probe into your 'past' in depth). Sometimes this is not of consequence but other times it could be important, a date, a place or something that your character should know too. If when quizzed you give the wrong corroborating account of events, this can lead to red herrings as the guests think you are lying deliberately. Therefore, if possible, if you realise you have let slip something on the spur of the moment that is nonsense, try and draw the other character (s) aside in time and tell them the new story. And if you don't have time to do so, and you get 'caught' out, make light of the situation and play for a laugh; 'Have we really been married for 5 years and not 8, well it seemed like even longer to me...!'

You will find there is plenty of opportunity to whisper in corners with the other performers (and when out of the room) to check tactics, prompt actions and arguments ('right, we need to reinforce our hatred of one another, let's go and have a fight in the middle of the room'). This is often necessary to keep things on track!

Character Overviews

Laura

The birthday girl, aged 70. Widow of Ronald Murray, minister. By appearance she is a well-meaning and kind-hearted lady, civil even with those she dislikes. However old she may be, she still has a sound mind and is proud of her immediate family; she looks less fondly on Davina, who she considers brash and nosy. Loves learning and hearing about history. Has a bag which she keeps on hand at all times, since it contains her medication.

David

Laura's eldest son. An MP. Has recently had a lot of media attention over his alleged involvement in some sort of criminal activity. He suspects Davina was the one who leaked the story to the press, and would like to get even. Appears stressed most of the time. Has inherited a disease from Laura, as have both his brothers.

Anne

David's wife, secretary to a publisher. Mortified that David is under attack from the press. Comes to think she may have married the wrong brother - she seems to have feelings for James, and sees Davina as an obstacle to that. Is also disappointed that James does not have time to finish his book, since the publishing company she works for is interested in reading a completed draft.

Simon

Laura's second son. A research chemist for a pharmaceutical company. Married to Carole. Has a good working knowledge of his trade. Is worried that Davina may be influencing his son, Craig, too much – he does not want his son drinking or smoking, and Davina provides opportunity for Craig to do both. Also has the family's hereditary disease, but his position as a research chemist may be encouraging him to look into medical solutions.

Carole

Simon's wife. A teacher. Wants to keep her son, Craig, under control; is concerned that since Davina has taken to spoiling Craig he has become wayward and disobedient. She bears a grudge against Davina for this reason. Devoted to her husband, but sometimes wants him to be in two places at once.

Craig

Simon and Carole's teenage son. A 'typical' teenage boy: slobby, sarcastic and introverted. Mainly interested in chewing gum and listening to loud music, but shows interest in history when it might involve ghosts. Quick to jump to conclusions. Enjoys it when his aunt spoils him, and likes to invent pranks.

Davina

James' wife. Sarcastic, nosy, and self-important. Has recently inherited a large amount of money from her deceased adoptive mother, with whom she shared a dysfunctional relationship. Thinks of her husband as a 'loser'. She smokes, drinks heavily, and it is implied she may turn to harder substances as well. She spoils Craig, her nephew, because she has no children of her own – a sore point with both her and her husband James. Davina is the victim in this scenario.

James

Laura's youngest son. A factory owner. Long-suffering husband of Davina. Courteous and polite to most but seems to have had enough of his wife's sarcasm. Is undergoing financial difficulties with his business but wants to keep it afloat – and Davina will not share her inheritance with him until he sells the factory. Is writing a book called 'The History Of Murder' – and, given the position he is in with his wife, may be interested in conducting some practical research!

Mary

Housekeeper employed by owners of Castle Hall House. A kindly soul who gives the impression of being a dodderly old lady, but she may have some connection to Davina. Has keys to the house and is constantly letting herself in to bring emergency supplies and reading material to the guests. She seems to know when the lights will go out...

Mary Queen of Scots

An optional guest appearance by Fotheringhay castle's most famous captive, opening the final scene.

Foulplay At Fotheringhay

Opening Script (excerpt)

(Mary comes in first holding a key, having just opened the door. James, Davina, Craig, Simon and Carole follow her in, carrying weekend bags. Carole has a helium balloon reading “Happy 70th birthday”. Davina has a carrier bag containing bottles which can be heard jangling together and she has clearly had a few drinks already. She plonks herself down in a chair - as does Craig, who slouches and chews gum as he nods his head in time to the music on his personal stereo.)

Mary: So you found us OK. It’s not easy to find my place these dark afternoons hidden behind all those trees but I like my privacy. Come on in out of that wind.

Simon: Yes thanks, the map you sent us was great. We found you without any problems. Is it always this windy in this part of the world? A real fire, what a welcome!

(Simon goes over to the fire and warms his hands.)

Mary: Yes, I lit the fire this morning to warm the house for you, there’s plenty of logs in the bucket over there – should be enough for the weekend but I’m just down the lane if you need anything.

Carole: Thanks, we’ll be fine. Simon, let’s go and sort out the bedrooms.

(Simon picks up their bags and walks off stage.)

Carole: Craig...

(He doesn’t respond so she repeats, louder.)

Carole: Craig, turn that thing down – you’ll damage your ears. Do you want to come and unpack your stuff or do you want me to do it?

Craig: Whatever, I don’t care.

(He remains in the same position on the same chair with the same bored look.)

(Carole turns to follow Simon offstage but before she leaves, turns back to Mary and asks:)

Carole: Any problems if we decorate the living room for Laura? I’d like to make it look cheerful for her as it’s her special birthday she’s been a bit down recently.

Mary: No problem – here let me take that balloon and tie it here.

(Mary takes the balloon from Carole and ties it to the back of a chair.)

Mary: That can be your mother’s chair for the weekend.

Carole: **(sarcastic)** OK Craig, I’ll take your bag up, don’t you bother yourself. I know how listening to music can make you so exhausted!

(Carole walks off to follow Simon.)

Mary: Teenagers, who’d have them! Do you have any children.

James: Unfortunately, no. I would have loved a family but you know, things don’t always work out as you’d planned and ... Davina and I haven’t been lucky?

Davina: No, you can say that again.

Mary: Oh um I see, um have you had far to come?

James: A fair way but we got away early to miss the traffic on the M25. We’re from Shepperton, you know where the studios are, so we picked up Simon, Carole and Craig from St Albans on our way. My other brother David is picking up Mum from Oxford – he and his wife are driving up from London but I don’t know what time he can get away. He’s an MP.

Mary: David Murray? Now where have I heard that name?

James: **(quickly changing the subject)** So it’s going to be a real family weekend. Mum likes to do the family thing and get us all together. It’s her 70th birthday tomorrow so we thought we’d rent somewhere big enough for us all and this place jumped out of the brochure at me.

Davina: **(sarcastic)** Well I still say she would have preferred Paris but you know best!

James: That’s a bit tactless Davina even by your standards. How would Dave have felt? And what would the papers be saying next week if he books into a Paris hotel again?

Davina: Mmmm, pity the press got to hear about his little escapade last summer.

Mary: So what made you decide on Fotheringhay?

James: Well... I know Mum loves history and this village is just oozing with stories of the past. Imagine, the birthplace of Richard III and the last home of Mary, Queen of Scots.

Mary: Some folk around here say the spirit of poor Mary is built into the walls of this house. They think it was built on the exact site of her trial and those thistles in the front garden are known as Queen Mary's tears around here. You're not frightened of ghosts are you?!

James: **(laughing.)** No of course not. My father was a man of the cloth, God rest his soul – we were brought up to believe in life after death but ghosts, no way.

Mary: Well I thought I'd better just warn you as we had some people staying here recently from the Psychic Phenomenon Society or some fancy name like that and they swore they saw Mary in the middle of the night.

Davina: Well they must be nutcases then. Ghosts, what a load of rubbish. James, haven't you taken our cases up yet? My clothes will be getting all creased – and before you go upstairs, fix me a G & T will you – I hope there's plenty of ice in the fridge.

(Davina hands James a half empty bottle of gin and a bottle of tonic from her carrier bag.)

Mary: Oh I'm sorry, here's me chattering on when you'll be wanting to settle in before the birthday girl arrives - don't forget now I'm just down the path if you need me.

Davina: **(aside)** How could we forget?

Mary: I'll see myself out - just give me a shout if you need anything.

James: Thank you very much, I'm sure we'll be fine.

(Mary leaves by the front door and James leaves the stage to get Davina's drink.)

Davina: Thank goodness that nosy old woman has gone. What's she doing sticking her nose in our business?

(She tries to ruffle Craig's hair and he has to adjust his hat but he smiles about it.)

Davina: Did silly Mrs Stewart frighten poor little Craigie Waigie?

Craig: **(laughing with Davina)** Hey Auntie, a few ghosts round here might buck the place up a bit – what a dump, not a pub in sight!

Davina: **(picks up her carrier bag)** Don't worry lad, I've come well supplied. I knew this weekend would be dull so I brought my survival kit.

(James comes back and hands Davina her drink in a large glass)

James: Now, leave the lad alone. You know Simon and Carole don't like him drinking. Please behave yourself this weekend, for Mum's sake if for not for mine.

(Carole and Simon come back in)

Simon: **(To James)** I hope you keep *her* **(looking at Davina)** under control. Mum's already upset about losing Dad without *her* making a scene and spoiling the weekend.

Davina: **(in a sarcastic tone)** Don't worry, I'll be on my very best behaviour.

Simon: And that applies to you too Craig. No sneaking off into the garden for a quick smoke with *her* – **(to Davina)** great example you set him.

Davina: I'm his auntie, it's my duty to spoil him rotten. **(indicating James)** *He* couldn't give me any kids so I've borrowed yours – any problems?

Carole: Well yes actually there are but I'm not going into them all now - David's car has just pulled up on the drive. Craig, move yourself will you and help me fix this banner before Gran arrives. Come on, hurry up, they'll be in here soon.

(Craig tuts and gets out of his chair reluctantly and holds the other end of a 'HAPPY 70th BIRTHDAY' banner which Carole is fixing to the wall over the fire place.)

Carole: Take that chewing gum out of your mouth now, you know how Gran hates it.

(Craig screws up his nose but removes his gum and throws it on the fire.)

Carole: Not there, you disgusting

(Craig returns to his chair and Carole's words are interrupted by the arrival of David, Anne and Laura. James has opened the door for them and takes his mother's arm as she comes into the room. David is carrying the bags. He is dressed in a suit and looks harassed.)

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