



*A Dinner-Theatre Murder Mystery*

by

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**Customer Taster**

# ***Murder at the Château***

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Nobody liked Lafosse. In the summer of 1944, with the Battle of Normandy raging close by, Lafosse found himself back at Château Brioché, in the fish pond, dead.

The château had been commandeered as a German command centre and, despite his men having pressing business elsewhere, Gruppenführer Braun thought a murder worth his attention...

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## **About the Murder Mystery pack**

The full pack should provide all the information necessary for staging a murder mystery for an audience to solve. It is a fully-scripted mystery for a cast of nine, played on a single set with a downstage area representing a second location.

### ***Structure***

The pack contains the following:

- The Organiser's Overview [*Extract here*]
- The full script [*Extract here*]
- Accusation sheets

### ***The Organiser's Overview Includes:***

- Event Guide
- Suggested Timetable
- Character Overview
- Plot Overview
- Production Notes

## **Event Guide**

### ***Character List***

**Gruppenführer Braun** - a senior German officer

**Marit van Rouge** - a Dutch diamond dealer

**Sophie, Baroness Yves-Roquefort** - French owner of Chateau Brioche

**Danny Murphy** - an Irish entertainer

**Mandy (real name Randy)** - a cross-dressing male American

**Sach** - Mandy's French female partner

**Father Henri Dubois** - a French priest

**Marie-Claire** - a Belgian pharmacist

**Jean Lafosse** - local French villain (denouement only)

### ***A One Night Show?***

Many groups think of a murder-mystery play as a one-night production and that can be a lot of work for just one performance. They often take this view because the secret of whodunit has been revealed and therefore some members of a new audience will know how the play ends, giving them an advantage in competing for a prize. However, other drama groups know that if asked, the audience will respect the need for secrecy, and will avoid letting the cat out of the bag even in a small community. After all, the value of the prize is unlikely to outweigh the fun of the performance and working together to find the solution. So why not put it on for two or three nights?

**Murder at the Château** is set in France in 1944. It starts with the discovery of a body and much of the play has the cast acting out the investigation of who killed the local villain, Jean Lafosse. However, the murder that occurs on the last page of Act 2 is the one the audience need to solve and that means they need to have recognised the correct clues even when the big red herring has been diverting their attention. Of course there are lots of smaller red herrings floating about in this fish pond...

## ***Suggested Event Format***

Although Murder at the Château could be performed as a three-act play (with or without audience participation), it is most likely to be produced as an event where there is a meal with courses served during appropriate times as suggested below. The caterer needs to know how important the timetable is, to avoid the event over-running and to try to prevent noise interfering with the performance.

As Murder at the Château is a fully scripted play, for the best effect it needs a support crew just as with any normal production.

Where audience participation is involved it may be a good idea to have a Master of Ceremonies who can explain the way the event will work, ensure the distribution of accusation sheets (at the appropriate time) and make sure the timetable is adhered to. If there is nobody else available to act as Master of Ceremonies, then the role could be taken by the actor playing Lafosse. (There is an element of fun to be had from an opening announcement about the format of the evening ending with “I shall play Jean Lafosse” since the action begins with his murder offstage.)

The most usual format is for each team to occupy a table to ensure the privacy of their deliberations. The accusation sheets could be on the tables at the start (or, if personnel are available, distributed at the end of Act 2). Immediately after Act 2 the teams are invited to complete and hand in their accusation sheet offering their opinion of whodunit and why. Teams are encouraged to provide additional detail to substantiate their opinion. Act 3 provides the solution which is acted out by the cast - who each explain their involvement in the murder. The event ends with the presentation of a prize (or prizes) for the best solution(s) offered.

In rehearsal, you may decide to keep the cast in the dark about the solution by rehearsing and acting Acts 1 & 2 before distributing the script for Act 3.

## ***Accusation Sheets***

Each team needs to complete an accusation sheet, which will form the basis for deciding who has won. The accusation sheet in this pack does not name the victim, thus enabling the sheets to be distributed before the performance.

## ***Adjudication***

The organiser needs to decide who will judge the solutions offered and that needs to be someone impartial with a knowledge of the play. The Director will often be suitable. Alternatively, the task might be performed by the cast, but if so the accusation sheets need to be collected in good time so that the cast can make their assessments before they perform Act 3.

Often several teams will get the right answer, so their summary of the evidence may identify the best solution. In the event of a tie the winner may be drawn at random from the correct solutions.

## **Suggested Timetable**

A suggested timetable is as follows. The run-time of each act is an estimate. If you need precise timings (for example for the timing of hot food), then time your rehearsals of each section.

19:30	Drinks/Starters
20:00	Act 1
20:35	Interval – Main Course
21:15	Act 2
21:45	Accusation Sheets completed – Dessert
22:05	Act 3 ‘The Solution’
22:15	Prizes and Coffee
22:30	Finish

## **Character Profiles**

### ***Danny Murphy***

Danny is Irish and pretends to have sympathy with the Germans through his nationality. He worked in France and Germany before the war and speaks both languages. He is, however, a British spy having been parachuted-in two years ago. During that time he has worked at the château as an entertainer – a singer and comedian. He works with Marie-Claire and they encourage people to think they are an item. In fact they dislike each other.

### ***Father Henri Dubois***

Dubois is not actually a priest. He is a petty criminal but not as bad as Lafosse. Some months ago he managed to make his escape from a tight spot by stealing and wearing a priest's robes. For a while he found that people were generous to a wandering priest, fed him and provided accommodation. This worked well for a while but then he was arrested and put in prison while the Milice decided what to do with him. Yesterday, a bombing raid damaged the jail and he found himself able to flee, although the explosion has left him rather deaf. He knows little about conducting services. His favourite phrase is - 'Trust me, I'm a priest'.

### ***Mandy (real name Randy Wayne Godber)***

Randy is an American who has run the local bar and brothel since just before the war. He dresses as a woman and wants everyone to call him Mandy because he believes it will reduce the risk of being sent to Germany as forced labour.

He is a wheeler-dealer who is determined to make a lot of money and sees the arrival of the Allies as a major opportunity both for his bar and by using the château. He and Sach have provided meals at the château for the German officers. He is ambitious, ruthless and dishonest.

### ***Sach***

Sach was a teacher at the local convent but when she tripped, fell and hurt herself outside the bar, Randy (in those days very masculine) looked after her and after a short time she left the convent to go and live with him. To begin with she was happy although she was shocked to gradually discover what kind of an establishment the bar really was. Sach has recently realised that Randy has other plans for her and she is going to leave him. She has developed a liking for Danny who she knows because he visits the bar from time to time.

### ***Gruppenführer Braun***

Braun is the commanding officer at the château. He can see that the Germans are going to lose the war and is determined to survive and when captured wants to be seen as a model occupier. He believes that his stint on the Eastern front earned him the right and has contrived to remain at the château while his troops are fighting the counter-offensive. He is the only German there. The murder gives him an opportunity to improve his credentials as a civilised man, determined to see justice done. He is sad that the glory days are gone, but a realist.

### ***Marit van Rouge***

A widow who learned early in the war that she needed to be totally ruthless. Her husband was a diamond merchant in Holland and taught her all she knows about diamonds. Marit has become very attached to General Lommer and they have met from time to time when his commitments have allowed. Marit is brave, intelligent and knows that the war is going against the Germans. She is not totally convinced that they will be able to protect her if the war is lost.

### ***Marie-Claire***

She is Belgian and runs the local pharmacy. She is very intelligent and dislikes many of the locals who are not too bright. The war has been a welcome opportunity to get away from the boredom of her day to day existence and she was an early member of the Resistance. She uses her knowledge and facilities to help the Resistance whenever she can and is respected by them. However, the chemistry between her and Danny is not so good. She feels patronised by him and that he doesn't trust her.

### ***Sophie, Baroness Yves-Roquefort***

Sophie is the French owner of Château Brioché. She has been a widow since the Baron was killed in Paris at the beginning of the war. She was forced to leave the château when the Germans requisitioned it in 1941. Having seen the troops leaving the area yesterday she has come to reclaim her property. While looking around she found the body of the local villain Lafosse in her fish pond. She is penniless and bitter.

### ***Jean Lafosse (Act 3 only)***

Deceased local villain. Just about everyone had a good reason for wanting him dead. He was known as a thief, a blackmailer, a bully, a collaborator, a black marketeer and womaniser.

## **Production Notes**

### ***The Set***

The play is straightforward to stage. It is mainly performed in the lounge of the château with two scenes in the garden.

Some productions will opt for a more comprehensive set. The lounge is an old fashioned room which has been the commandeered home for a few years of German officers.

The set needs a table and several chairs. In a few scenes there are several characters on stage together and for some to be seated will avoid the feeling that some are 'just standing around'. Although the author has provided directions for entry/exit to take account of where characters are coming from/going to, there is no critical link between these directions and the plot (though consistency may help the audience to develop a mental picture of the château). There is no need for functional doors. The entry upstage centre would need some way of disguising the view beyond the entrance – a curtain or similar would suffice.

The scenes in the garden can be played downstage or wherever local space allows. During both these scenes there is mimed activity in the lounge so the lounge needs to remain visible and lit.

The author has no objection to additional humour being introduced into the play, perhaps for example as localised references.

# ***Murder at the Château***

*[Script extract]*

## **Act 1 - The lounge of Château Brioché - morning after breakfast.**

(Normandy in the summer of 1944 following the D-day invasion. Château Brioché is a run-down small château, requisitioned by the Germans earlier in the war to house their local command. There is a coffee table and several chairs. There are three exits to the room. The access upstage centre could be a door or covered by a curtain, with an appropriate flat behind. The other exits need not be practical doors. Upstage left goes to a morning room and from there, outside to the fish pond. The kitchen is upstage right and the hall/upstairs/downstairs from upstage centre.) (Braun is polishing his pistol and Marit is polishing her nails. Suddenly a dinner gong sounds loud and fast, the sound coming from the hall.)

**Braun:** What is this? We only just had breakfast.

**Marit:** Indeed. (Looks at her watch.) Much too soon.

(The gonging stops, only to start again, followed by the sound of the gong being knocked to the floor. Sophie enters upstage centre ahead of Danny, who is holding her by the arm, which she shakes off. She is hyperventilating.)

**Danny:** Just tell me what's the matter.

**Sophie:** Body! Body in fish...! (Pointing upstage left.)

**Danny:** What?

(Danny slaps Sophie's face just hard enough to stop her hysterics.)

**Danny:** Stop!

**Sophie:** (Gulping for air.) Fosse - in fish! Body in fish pond. Lafosse! In the pond!

**Danny:** Ah, I think I see. Lafosse, you say?

**Sophie:** Floating.

**Danny:** Drowned?

**Sophie:** Red!

**Danny:** I think you'd better show me.

(Danny takes Sophie's arm and they, Braun and Marit exit upstage left.)

**Danny:** (As he exits.) Who are you anyway, madam?

(There is a pause before Mandy and Sach enter upstage right.)

**Sach:** I tell you I heard the gong.

**Mandy:** But *I* always ring the gong. (Looks out into the hall upstage centre.) It's on the floor.

**Sach:** Yes Randy, so someone's fooling about. But anyway, it's not important. What's important is what I just told you. I'm leaving you. Had enough.

**Mandy:** Look, we're nearly there. When the Yanks arrive we've all they need. They'll buy lots of R and R, American-style. It'll set us up for life. Come on, Sach. We just need to get this place ready.

**Sach:** No. You conned me from the moment we met, and I've had enough. Be honest Randy, you're just a cross-dressing brothel-keeper selling home-made booze in a sleazy bar. Always on the make.

**Mandy:** I'm doing it all for you, honey.

**Sach:** Don't you honey me! You'd have me working upstairs with the girls if you had your way. I heard you talking to that toad Lafosse about me - and Randy, I'm telling you...

**Mandy:** (Interrupting) No, I'm telling you! Just listen to yourself. You've enjoyed all the other stuff haven't you, little Miss Pure? The presents, the food, the clothes, the parties. There's always a price to be paid, but you just didn't want to know.

**Sach:** You never asked me if that's what I wanted. When I fell for you Randy, I didn't know what you were like. You told me you were a poor American boy who'd been chased out of his own country by bad men. Italians. All to do with prohibition, you said. Pff! Well now I know it's all to do with those girls upstairs. Do you know I was even teaching some of them last year?

**Mandy:** It was you who chose to think that tarts were something to do with a patisserie.

**Sach:** I may have been an innocent girl from the convent when I came, but I'm not stupid. I soon worked out what tarts meant, Randy...

**(Dubois enters upstage centre.)**

**Dubois:** **(Interrupting)** Was that for lunch, I...? Oh!

**Mandy:** **(Hisses at Sach.)** How many times? It's Mandy!

**Sach:** **(Shrugs)** Father, do you know what's happening?

**Dubois:** Is it lunch-time?

**Sach:** Oh, not yet. We haven't finished clearing up after breakfast. Are you here for lunch?

**Dubois:** That's a shame. I heard the gong. I thought that might have been for lunch. I missed breakfast...

**(Danny enters upstage left.)**

**Danny:** **(Interrupting)** Ah, good. Oh, er, Father! Hello. Randy - we need a couple of strong blokes. Lafosse has been shot. He must have been upstairs, but he's ended up in the fish pond. We need to get him out.

**Mandy:** Lafosse! Can't you help him?

**Danny:** He's dead, you idiot! And he's heavy.

**Mandy:** Oh! But I'm a girl!

**Danny:** Randy, everyone knows what you are. Come on, we need some muscle. Not you Sach - he's not a pretty sight. Lots of bleeding. Father, will you help? Could you give him a blessing?

**(Marit leads Sophie slowly in upstage left, holding her by the arm and sits her down.)**

**Dubois:** A blessing? Oh, yes, yes. A blessing.

**Danny:** I think we're all blessed he's dead. Lafosse was a nasty piece of work. You do whatever you think he needs later. But we'd better get him out before the fish think the gong was for their lunch. Come on.

**(Danny grabs Mandy's hand which she shakes off. She exits with Danny and Dubois upstage left.)**

**Marit:** It's been a nasty shock for you madam, finding him like that. Do you live here?

**Sophie:** This is my home. I was thrown out by the Germans in forty-one but I saw them leaving yesterday, so I've come to take back what's mine. I was walking round to see how the garden's been looked after. I saw the fish pond and it was red... **(Whimpers)**

**Marit:** Ah, so you are...? Baroness...?

**Sach:** This is Baroness Sophie Yves-Roquefort. But who are...?

**Sophie:** **(Interrupting and recovered.)** That is correct, I am. You have heard of me?

**Marit:** I have.

**Sach:** Mandy'll be interested to meet you madam. She's got great plans for this place. Well, she will when the Germans have left.

**Sophie:** Plans! I know of no plans. Château Brioché has been in our family for generations and I intend to live here now. But I did see a German just now. They haven't left?

**Sach:** Oh, I think they have. I don't know why the Gruppenführer's still here. Maybe he's planning a heroic last stand. I think it's more likely he's looking for a safe place to hide before giving himself up. Did you know Lafosse, madam? You said his name earlier.

**Sophie:** Yes, I knew him, though I can't say I liked him. My husband knew him better. When he was alive.

**Marit:** Ah, you are also a widow, madam, it is very sad. I know. Too many of our husbands have died in this war. I am Marit, Baroness. Marit van Rouge.

**(Sophie nods. Dubois enters upstage left.)**

**Dubois:** They didn't need me after all. Your friend is very strong my dear. It's almost as if... **(Waves his hands.)**

**Sach:** Yes. Mandy says it runs in her family. Something to do with the effects of absinthe. The drink, you know. They make it. Mandy gave it to me once. It's very strong. I haven't touched a drop since. Yuck!

**Dubois:** There are parts of the world where it's forbidden. I think people here drink it to forget the war.



**Sophie:** Ah, the war. If my husband had been alive none of this would have happened. He would never have let the Germans take over the château. All those strangers defiling our home. And today the château should be empty - I don't understand where all you people have come from.

**Sach:** My partner, Mandy and I prepare the meals. Speaking of which I need to finish clearing away after breakfast. Excuse me.

**(Sach exits upstage right.)**

**Sophie:** And you, Father - who are you? What are you *all* doing here?

**Dubois:** Me, madam? I'm Father Henri Dubois. I'm on my way to join the Benedictine brothers.

**Marit:** You've a long way to go then, Father. I believe their monastery is in Fecamp, in Upper Normandy. You have a strong calling to join them?

**Dubois:** Well, madam I'm a little hard of hearing at present, **(emphasises this by slightly banging the side of his head)** so I can't say I hear them calling, but I do like Benedictine.

Unfortunately, I do seem to keep getting lost. Ha! I don't seem to be very good with compasses **(holds up a compass which is round his neck).**

**(Braun and Danny enter upstage left.)**

*[Continues in the full script.]*