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ABRAM SKINNER - A STEAMPUNK MURDER MYSTERY

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History took an unexpected turn in the early 19th Century, oil was never exploited, so the steam-age continued, expanded and was refined.

Inventor Abram Skinner is taking full advantage of the opportunities of this age of technological entrepreneurs and has invited guests to the launch of his latest project which he believes will bring about revolutionary changes.

The company includes an adventurer, a naval pilot, wealthy investors and industrialists, and, amongst them, an assassin.

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About the pack

The full Murder Mystery pack should provide everything you need to produce your very own murder mystery event.

The pack is intended to be used either

- In a performance to an audience, where an acting company will perform a set of events for the assembled guests.
- Or
- At a private party, where the party guests are the performers.

The pack is, in part, a **scripted performance**, but there is also a point at which the audience (or guests at a private party) interrogate the cast, with the cast improvising their responses from character briefs and interrogation briefs. (The scripted section contains all the information necessary to solve the mystery; the interrogation should serve to clarify some points.) After the interrogation, there is a final scripted scene that reveals whodunnit.

Structure

This murder mystery pack contains:-

- The Organiser's Overview [*extract here*]
- One "Character Brief" for each Character [*three heavily edited extracts here*]
- Scene 1 (Exposition) Script [*extract here*]
- One "Interrogation Brief" for each Character
- Scene 2 (Interrogation) Script
- "Audience Accusation sheets" for the audience to enter their solutions
- "Party Accusation Sheets" (the same - with a slight variation for a private party)
- Scene 3 (Denouement) Script - in which the murderer is revealed

The Organiser's Overview includes:

A list of the **Characters**

An **Introduction to the Steampunk Age**

A **Plot Overview**

Suggested Timings

A **Murder Mystery Party Guide** (for running the event as a private party where there guests are the performers)

A **Performance Guide** (for running the mystery in front of an audience). This includes a **Props** list.

Characters

Abram Skinner - an Inventor (M)

Twistleton Crisp - an Adventurer (M)

Araminta Dijon - an Assassin (F)

Tamar Tregony - an Industrialist (F)

Sir Ezra Hamilton-Gore - a Banker (M)

Lady Hepzibah Quagg - a Wealthy Heiress (F)

Captain Ackroyd - a former Naval Pilot (Either M or F)

The characters do not need to be specific ages. For a performance to an audience, Abram Skinner and Tamar Tregony should be about the same age, but that's really the only constraint.

An Introduction to the Steampunk Age

Some time in the early 19th century, history took an alternative path. Oil has not been found, or, at least, not exploited; there are no oil-based engines and no plastics. Materials are dominated by wood, natural fibres and metals, notably brass, and power comes from steam engines. Scientific and technological progress has continued - indeed, this is a very technological age - but the new technologies that are springing-up depend heavily on their precursors.

The precise chronology of this age is vague, but fashion owes a lot to the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, with a heavy overlay of mechanical technologies. It is an era of aggressive buccaneer capitalism. Whilst, in theory, there are civil authorities, in practice the world is being carved-up by industrial barons whose moral outlook is winner-takes-all.

Plot Overview

Inventor Abram Skinner is taking full advantages of the opportunities of this age of technological entrepreneurs and has invited guests to the launch of his latest project which he believes will bring about revolutionary changes. The invitees include the audience (if any) and a group of VIPs. The company includes an adventurer, a naval pilot, wealthy investors and industrialists, and, amongst them, an assassin.

Skinner has not divulged the nature of the project to all his guests, some of whom come bearing grudges.

The basic format is a scripted scene, at the end of which someone is murdered, a semi-scripted scene, leading the participants through the investigation of suspects (who improvise their answers on the basis of character briefs and interrogation briefs), and (after a pause for the participants to write down their accusations) a final scripted denouement.

Suggested Timings

The following timings assume the event is staged around a three-course meal.

- 7:30 p.m. - Welcome and Starters
- 8:00 p.m. - Scene 1- Exposition
- 8:30 p.m. - Main Course
- 9:00 p.m. - Scene 2 - Interrogation
- 9:30 p.m. - Audience submit their suspicions, Dessert
- 9:45 p.m. - Scene 3 - Denouement
- 9:50 p.m. - Prizes awarded, coffee.

Murder Mystery Party Guide

1. Before the event, the Organiser allocates the roles (without reading the role-specific information or the denouement!)
2. Preparation before the event
 - Give a copy of their own Character Brief to each actor. (The Organiser should avoid reading these!)
 - (The actors may want sufficient notice to create appropriate costumes for their characters.)
 - Print (but do not read) one copy of the Scene 1 Script for each actor.
 - Print (but do not read) the Interrogation Briefs.
 - Print (but do not read) one copy of the Scene 2 (Interrogation) Script for each actor.
 - Print (but do not read) one copy of the Scene 3 (Denouement) for each actor.
 - Print one copy of the Private Accusation Sheet for each actor.
3. Start the event
 - Distribute the “Private Accusation Sheets” and the Scene 1 (Exposition) Script.
 - Perform Scene 1. (It is probably best to do this as a table reading, rather than trying to perform the actions. The organiser – should read the stage directions aloud as they occur.)
 - Pause after Scene 1.
4. After Scene 1
 - Cast Members complete the Preliminary section of the Private Accusation Sheets.
 - (This is done *before* the distribution of the Interrogation Brief which tells the murderer whodunit, at which point their Accusation Sheet would just say “it was me”.)
 - At this point, the cast has enough information to solve the mystery, if they think hard enough! The interrogation should just confirm – or deny – their suspicions.
5. Before Scene 2
 - Give a copy of their own Interrogation Brief to each actor.
 - Since this tells one of the actors that they are the murderer, the briefs should be read as privately as possible, and with poker faces. Allow a few minutes to digest the briefs.
6. Perform Scene 2 of the Script.
 - This is a mixture of scripted dialogue and improvised interrogation.
 - Suspects should answer questions based on their Character Briefs and Interrogation Briefs. They should answer honestly (although they may be cagey on some points), but the murderer is allowed to lie about anything that could be directly incriminating.
 - Unusually, in a Murder Mystery Party, the deceased is allowed to question the suspects!
7. Complete Accusation Sheets
 - (Use the written sheets to avoid early verbal answers influencing the later ones.)
8. Perform the Scene 3 (Denouement) script.
9. Review the Accusation Sheets.
 - (The murderer should have got the answer right in the final round, so if you are awarding prizes, only the murderer’s Preliminary answer should count!)

Performance Guide

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

First Rehearsal

Initial preparation can be done by distributing the character briefs, then running a first rehearsal in which the actors have to guess the identity of the murderer, as per the Murder Mystery Party Guide. (It's fun! Why not?)

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

Prepare the roles

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! (Don't overdo it! All the information you need is in the pack. Two or three of the characters have briefs that cover far more than the audience will ever ask.)

Develop "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. Captain Ackroyd in particular should plan to manage irrelevant questions.)

Plan for assessing the audience's "Accusation Sheets"

Somebody needs to distribute and collect the accusation sheets.

For a dinner theatre event, the audience will normally be grouped around tables, cabaret style, with one accusation sheet per table.

The audience submit their accusations after they have interrogated the suspects. Someone (usually members of the cast) needs to assess the answers. This needs to be done quickly, as the winners will be declared after the short scripted denouement scene.

The winner should have identified the murderer and given the best description of motive and timing. Decide what to do in the event of a tie (usually a means of random selection).

Decide on the format for declaring the winner.

Consider bringing on the ghost of the victim to award prizes. (Sometimes a booby prize for the worst answer might be appropriate.)

Facilities

The script is designed to be run without a specific set. A few chairs would be useful, but they need to be appropriate for the style of the event.

The acting area needs to have one exit.

The cast will need somewhere "backstage" away from the audience for the times when they are not on stage (this is particularly important for the victim). This will also be used for assessing the accusation sheets.

If this is staged, as suggested, as a dinner theatre event, if the cast members are allowed to eat, they will need to do so backstage. (That is to say, the meal is not integrated into the plot in a way that would allow the cast members to dine with the audience.)

Costume

The cast should be dressed suitably for the steampunk age (technological Victoriana). The conceit of the script is that the audience has been invited as potential investors in Abram Skinner's latest invention, so they might be invited to dress appropriately for the occasion.

Performance Sequence

- The cast perform Scene 1 (Exposition), which is fully scripted. At the end of Scene 1, the murder is discovered.
- Distribute “accusation sheets” to the audience.
- Ask the audience to consider the questions they would like to ask the subjects.
- The cast perform Scene 2 (Interrogation). This is semi-scripted, with each section leading into the interrogation (by the audience) of a suspect.
- At the end of Scene 2, the audience complete their “accusation sheets”. These are collected and assessed by the scrutineers.
- The cast perform Scene 3 (Denouement), which is scripted.
- When the murderer has been revealed, the cast announce winners from the audience and award prizes.

ABRAM SKINNER - A STEAMPUNK MURDER MYSTERY

Scene 1 - Exposition (*brief extract*)

(The interior of a public lounge, comfortable without being opulent. The furniture no more than a few upholstered upright chairs. A single entrance at one side.)

(Skinner, Dijon and Crisp are on stage. Dijon is positioned so that she is not in direct sight of the entrance.)

Crisp: I didn't realise you had Ackroyd on board - with the project, I mean.

Skinner: Yes, the naval background and ballooning experience seemed ideal. Certainly worked well with the prototype. Excellent navigator. No problem with the night tests.

Crisp: Who else are you expecting before all is revealed?

Skinner: All the regular guests are here (*gesturing to the audience*) and Ackroyd is just bringing the last three VIPs through the tunnel, then we can start.

Crisp: About time.

Skinner: Your restlessness betrays your calling, Mr Crisp. You always want to be on the move.

Dijon: Whereas I?

Skinner: Have the patience of a rock. Ah here they come.

(Enter Ackroyd, presenting Tregony, Hamilton-Gore and Quagg.)

Ackroyd: Your remaining guests, Sir. I shall make ready.

Skinner: And start at your discretion. Thank you, Captain Ackroyd.

(Ackroyd nods and departs.)

Skinner: Welcome, welcome. Lady Quagg, a pleasure, Ezra, Tamar, this is a delight...

Quagg: (*Seeing Dijon.*) You!

Dijon: Lady Quagg.

Skinner: No need to be alarmed.

Tregony: What's she doing here? I mean to say, this is not what I expected from your invitation to a business discussion.

Skinner: As you say, Tamar, this is a business event; Araminta is a very useful businesswoman.

Quagg: Yes, if you need the services of an assassin.

Skinner: I mean that she has so many acquaintances.

Quagg: Many of them very brief.

[*The scene continues in the full script.*]

Abram Skinner – Character Brief (extract)

A brilliant inventor, with a broad range of expertise encompassing machines - from pocket watches to steam engines and a wide variety of chemical processes and applications. (He is well-known for his measuring instruments, including chronometers, thermometers, barometers, anemometers, odometers, pedometers and cardiometers, but his wealthy private clients value his knowledge and application in a variety of more esoteric fields).

Skinner has invited guests - mainly potential investors - to the launch of his latest project. He has not told the investors the nature of the project. Twistleton Crisp, the adventurer knows all about the project, as, of course, does Captain Ackroyd, employed by Skinner. The others guests are Sir Ezra Hamilton-Gore, a banker, Lady Hepzibah Quagg, a wealthy heiress, Tamar Tregony, head of an industrial conglomerate and Araminta Dijon, a professional assassin.

Skinner projects an air of bonhomie, but despite this, he is not really a people person. He sees people as stepping stones to advance his work - and to promote himself as a genius.

Sir Ezra Hamilton-Gore – Character Brief (extract)

Partner in Cogturners, a private bank, Sir Ezra Hamilton-Gore is comfortably wealthy from other people's money. The bank is a highly successful funder of industrial enterprises.

He is here at the invitation of Skinner, who has promised to reveal a project of world-changing importance, without saying anything whatsoever about it. Sir Ezra is, of course, sceptical about this. He has no doubt about Skinner's genius, but knows his track record well, and of course fully expects that Skinner will be asking for funding.

Sir Ezra lives in a technological age and funds industrial enterprise, but, despite bearing the emblems of Cogturners Bank, knows nothing about the technologies he is funding. He is a banker to his core, but also a party animal, so he welcomes the opportunity for a jolly jaunt away from the bank for business research purposes.

He has long known Lady Quagg through her dealings with Cogturners Bank and a shared social circle. He knows of, but had not previously met, Tamar Tregony (who runs a forestry/industrial conglomerate) and Twistleton Crisp, an adventurer.

Tamar Tregony – Character Brief (extract)

Despite her somewhat diffident manner, Miss Tamar Tregony is a sharp businesswoman. She is managing director of the Tregony family firm, specialising in the exploitation of natural resources, with interests including temperate forestry, rubber plantations, silkworm farms and silk mills.

For over a year, she has been supplying Skinner with significant quantities of rubber, silk cloth, silk thread and turpentine. She had no idea of the use to which Skinner is putting the materials. However it came as little surprise when she received an invitation to the unveiling of his latest project, something he heralded as a glimpse of the future. She accepted the invitation - there could be business deals to be done - but she is sceptical about the real purpose, as Skinner always wants something.