



*A Dinner Theatre Murder Mystery*  
by

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**Customer Taster**

# **Murder at the Movies**

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# Murder at the Movies

Who knew that murder could be so much fun?

## ***Included in your Murder at the Movies pack:***

1. Organiser's Overview [*Extract here*], which contains:
  - Introduction
  - Plot Synopsis
  - List of Characters
  - Character Background Information
  - Suggested Timings
  - Notes on Audience Interrogation
  - Staging and Production Notes
2. Full Script [*Extract here*]
3. Accusation Sheet
4. Murder at the Movies Logo – for use on posters, etc.

## **Introduction**

Murder at the Movies is a scripted murder mystery drama that can be solved by its audience via the clues presented in the script. There is also opportunity for an audience interrogation, where audience members can put questions to the characters in order to gain background information as well as additional clues. While this adds a fun and interactive element to the performance, it does mean that the cast will need to do some preparation beforehand, thinking about their characters and what questions they may be asked, and readying answers.

The murder mystery is intended to be performed by a cast of eight actors on a stage or other performance area, where the audience has full view of the action. There are nominally five acts, with breaks between them, which allow time for the audience members to take stock of the action and deliberate. It is particularly suitable to be performed as dinner theatre, where the audience members sit in groups/teams at tables and food and drink is enjoyed between acts. The audience can use these intervals to discuss the action that has taken place, submit questions for the interrogation, and have time to crack the case. The killer is revealed at the end of the evening by way of a re-enactment of the murder.

## **Plot Synopsis**

Murder at the Movies is set in 1945, during the golden age of British filmmaking. The action takes place at Henham Film Studios in Buckinghamshire, during the filming of the movie *Brief Liaison*. The lead roles in the movie are played by Laurence Craven, an actor of questionable talent, and his amiable wife, Clara Bennett. Things are not, however, going smoothly on set.

Questions are being asked as to why director Charles Reynolds cast Laurence and whether Laurence's relationship with his wife is all that it seems. Add in disgruntled screenwriter Bertie Hayes, an excitable make-up assistant, a jealous actor and an over-attentive production assistant, and suddenly the glamour of the movies begins to fade. One person's time working on this movie really will be brief, and it's up to Detective Inspector Aubrey Hart to discover just what has been going on behind the scenes.

## **Characters**

**Laurence Craven** – actor, male, aged 40 to 65.

**Clara Bennett** – actress, Laurence’s wife, female, aged 40 to 65 (similar age to Laurence).

**Charles Reynolds** – movie director, male, aged 30 to 60.

**Freddie Lancaster** – actor, male, aged 30 to 50.

**Bertie Hayes** – screenwriter, male, aged 40 to 65 (similar age to Laurence).

**Frances Malory** – movie production assistant, female, aged 30 to 50.

**Lillian Peters** – make-up assistant, female, aged 20 to 40.

**Detective Inspector Aubrey Hart** – police inspector, male or female, any age.

## **Character Background Information**

### ***Laurence Craven***

Laurence is an actor, although not a very good one. He is playing the lead character, Henry, in the movie *Brief Liaison*, which is currently being filmed at Henham Studios. He was given the part at the last minute, replacing Freddie Lancaster, who was originally cast as the lead.

Laurence started acting after he left school and has been in many movies, although nobody is quite sure why, given his obvious lack of acting talent. He has been married to the actress Clara Bennett for twenty years. Laurence went to school with Bertie Hayes, the screenwriter of the movie. Laurence is arrogant and brash. Outwardly he and his wife give the impression of having a happy marriage, but there are obvious tensions between them.

Laurence Craven’s real name is Leslie Crowbottom. He changed it when he started acting at the age of eighteen. It is well known that he enjoys drinking whisky and betting on horse racing.

### ***Charles Reynolds***

Charles is the director of *Brief Liaison*. The last movie he directed, *Black Velvet*, also starred Laurence Craven and was panned by the critics. He was responsible for casting Laurence as Henry in *Brief Liaison* at the last minute, despite Freddie Lancaster having already been given the role.

He has a wife, Celia, and two daughters. Despite this, he is having an affair with Frances Malory, the production assistant on the movie. They started their affair on the set of *Black Velvet*, which she also worked on.

***[Others included in the full Murder Mystery Pack]***

## Suggested Timings

(All timings are approximate.)

Act 1	Scripted dialogue.	15 minutes
	Optional break.	As required
Act 2	Scripted dialogue – Ends with discovery of the murder.	15 minutes
	Interval for food.	As required
Act 3	Scripted dialogue – The arrival of Detective Inspector Hart.	10 minutes
	Break for teams to discuss and submit questions.	As required
Act 4	Unscripted – Audience questions put to the suspects by Detective Inspector Hart. (Optional.)	15 minutes
	Break for teams to fill in accusation sheets.	As required
Act 5	Scripted dialogue – Contains the re-enactment of the murder and the reveal of the murderer.	10 minutes
	Prize giving at end if required.	

## Audience Interrogation

- After Act 3, there is a break for audience members to discuss their thoughts with each other and submit a question to ask one or more of the suspects. These questions will be put to the suspects by Detective Inspector Hart during Act 4.
- An explanation of how this element of the performance will work should be left on the tables as a written note for the audience to read on arrival, or read out by a compere at the start of the performance. It is a good idea to forewarn audience members at the beginning of the performance that they will be given the opportunity to ask a question later on, so that they can think about this during the play.
- Tables should be provided with paper and pens so teams can take notes during the performance.
- It is recommended that each team or table are asked to submit only one question, to avoid too many questions and the interrogation dragging on.
- All the suspects should answer the questions that are put to them as truthfully as possible, keeping in character at all times. They may make up additional background details that they deem appropriate, as long as these details don't affect the actual murder and don't contradict anything that the audience has seen happen. The cast should do some homework and think of things that they might be asked so that they have answers ready. For example, they should think about where they were when the murder took place.
- The murderer, and only the murderer, is allowed to lie. They will want to think about details such as a made-up alibi before the questioning takes place.
- After all the questions have been asked, another short break should take place to allow the teams to fill in their accusation sheets and submit them. Be sure to tell the teams how long they have got to make their final deliberation, and make sure that all the accusation sheets have all been handed in before performing Act 5.
- If you prefer to skip audience interrogation, then the break between Act 3 and Act 5 should be used by teams to fill in and submit their accusation sheets.
- While Act 5 takes place on stage, the organisers should read all the accusation sheets and decide who is the winning team. Many teams may guess the correct killer, so you can use their explanations of how and why the murder took place to choose an overall winner, or simply give prizes to all the teams who identified the correct murderer.

## Staging and Production Notes

### *Set*

The action in *Murder at the Movies* takes place on a 'film set' in a British film studio in 1945, during the filming of the movie *Brief Liaison*, which is also set in the 1940s. The film set can be any appropriate interior or exterior, for example, a room in a house, a garden, a street, a park, etc., as long as it is 1940s in style and décor where appropriate. This can be created as simply or elaborately as required, with just some background props such as a park bench and a tree, or a complete set.

The character of Charles, the movie's director, watches the 'filming' take place, so a director's chair for him to sit in is a great addition. You could also add in a movie camera and a non-speaking camera operator for added authenticity.

Acts 1 to 4 all take place here, with only Act 5 (the re-enactment of the murder, which previously happened offstage) requiring some simple additional staging. Here, the stage is simply set with a few items of furniture to indicate the interior of Laurence's trailer, e.g. a mirror propped up on a dresser or a clothes rail or coat stand. A comfortable chair is set centre stage, with a small table next to it.

# Murder at the Movies

[Script Extract]

## Act 1

(1945. Henham Movie Studios, Buckinghamshire, England. A film set for the movie *Brief Liaison*, which is also set in the 1940s. Laurence and Clara are centre stage, playing the characters Henry and Emily. Laurence is not a very good actor. Charles is sitting in a director's chair, stage right, watching the action, holding a megaphone. Frances is standing beside him, holding a clipboard.)

**Charles:** Action!

**Laurence:** But my darling, how could you doubt me?

**Clara:** You promised that you'd wait for me at the station. When you weren't there, I thought...

**Laurence:** Oh, my sweetheart. I'm so sorry. I was called away. An old lady had fainted at the post office. I had to help.

**Clara:** Damn your Hippocratic Oath! A doctor is always a doctor.

**Laurence:** My darling, you know how much I love you. If we hurry, we can still catch the eleven-thirty train to Aber... ris... slip.

**Clara:** (Angrily.) For god's sake, Laurence. It's Aberystwyth! Why can't you get it right?

**Charles:** (Stands up.) Cut! Cut!

**Clara:** Charles, this is ridiculous, that was the seventh take. *Brief Liaison*? Hah! There's nothing brief about how long it's taking to shoot this movie!

**Charles:** I'm so sorry, darling. You'll forgive your silly husband, won't you?

**Clara:** (Insincerely.) Of course, darling. (Through gritted teeth.) I just wish you could get it right for once.

**Charles:** Clara, Laurence is just taking his time to, you know, fully immerse himself in the role. Isn't that right, Laurence?

**Laurence:** Yes, yes, of course. I'm immersing myself in the role.

**Charles:** (To Frances.) Miss Malory, can I see the shot list, please?

**Frances:** Yes, Mr Reynolds.

(Frances shows the clipboard to Charles. They both study it, ignoring Laurence and Clara's conversation.)

**Clara:** (To Laurence, quietly.) Have you been immersing yourself in the role or just another bottle of whisky?

**Laurence:** (Snidely.) At least drinking gives me a personality. Maybe you should try it.

**Clara:** You really are quite obnoxious, aren't you?

(Charles and Frances look up.)

**Charles:** Right, let's go from the top of the scene again.

**Clara:** (Over-dramatically.) Must we, Charles? I can feel one of my migraines coming on.

**Charles:** Darling, maybe you should have a rest. You look awfully tired. Are those bags under your eyes?

(Laurence puts his arm 'lovingly' around Clara. She resists removing it, as Charles and Frances are watching.)

**Charles:** Alright, let's have a quick break. The lighting is all wrong anyway. (To offstage right.) Bob, I said I wanted soft rose, not vivid magenta!

(Charles exits stage right, followed by Frances. Clara immediately shrugs off Laurence's arm.)

**Clara:** Get off me.

**Laurence:** With pleasure.

**Clara:** This is insufferable. I don't know why Charles cast you in this movie.

**Laurence:** Perhaps he thought our off-screen chemistry would ooze over onto the big screen.

**Clara:** What off-screen chemistry? We can't abide each other.

**Laurence:** Darling, I know that, and you know that, but to everyone else we are a loving and harmonious married couple. Surely it's not that hard to pretend. I thought you were an actress, after all.

**Clara:** Freddie was supposed to be my leading man.

**Laurence:** Ah yes, dear old Freddie Lancaster. You two do seem rather close. Such a shame that he'll always play second fiddle to me.

**Clara:** You're so beastly! Marrying you was the worst mistake of my life. I can't believe that I've wasted twenty years of my life with you.

**Laurence:** **(Insincerely.)** I love you too, darling!

**(Charles enters stage right, followed by Frances.)**

**Charles:** Right, let's go again. Clara, how's your head?

**Clara:** Terrible. I'm going for a lie-down in my trailer.

**(Clara exits stage left.)**

**Charles:** Great, that's just what we need. This movie is already behind schedule by six weeks. And over budget. It'll be a miracle if it ever gets finished.

**Laurence:** But Charles, old boy, it must. I need this movie to be a success. I'm relying on you. You won't let me down now, will you?

**Charles:** No, of course not, Laurence.

**Laurence:** Jolly good. Now, I just need to have a word with you about that last scene. I've had a few thoughts...

**(Laurence puts his arm round Charles and guides him off stage right, quietly talking as they walk. Frances is left onstage looking at her clipboard. Lillian enters stage left, wearing an apron and carrying a make-up kit bag.)**

**Lillian:** **(Whispering.)** Frances, is he here?

**Frances:** Who?

**Lillian:** Mr Craven, of course.

**Frances:** Honestly, Lillian. I don't why you idolise him so much. He's just an actor.

**Lillian:** But he's so talented and handsome. I've watched all his movies. Black Velvet is my favourite!

**Frances:** Lillian, you're here to do a job, in case you've forgotten. You're just a make-up assistant. Mr Craven will get annoyed with you if you keep following him around.

**Lillian:** Well, that's where you're wrong. He's been as nice as pie to me. He said he loves to meet his fans and that I can go to his trailer to see him whenever I like. He even gave me a bar of chocolate yesterday.

**Frances:** Did he now?

**Lillian:** I told him that I want to be an actress. He said that he could get me a part in a movie. He said that he could see my name up in lights.

**Frances:** Oh Lillian, don't be so silly.

**Lillian:** Miss Bennett is so lucky to be married to him. When I was doing her make-up yesterday, I heard her telling Mr Lancaster that she's planning to buy a new house. Somewhere far away like Italy, she said. Perhaps it's a holiday home for her and Mr Craven.

**Frances:** Lillian, you really shouldn't gossip. Now could you get on with your work please? The extras need their make-up checking for the next scene.

**(Bertie enters stage left.)**

**Bertie:** Miss Malory, I need a word.

**(Frances notices that Lillian is still standing there.)**

**Frances:** Off you go, Lillian.

**Lillian:** Yes, Miss Malory.

**(Lillian exits stage right.)**

**Frances:** Now, how can I help, Bertie?

**Bertie:** Frances, am I or am I not the screenwriter on this movie?

**Frances:** Yes, of course you are.

**Bertie:** And my screenplay got full approval from the director before we started shooting?

**Frances:** Yes.



**Bertie:** Then why on god's earth has Charles asked me to completely rewrite some of the scenes? They were perfect already!

**Frances:** I'm afraid I've got no idea.

**Bertie:** It's a bloody outrage, I tell you!

**(Freddie storms in stage right.)**

**Freddie:** It's a bloody outrage, I tell you!

**Bertie:** I'm glad someone agrees with me, Freddie.

**Freddie:** Agrees with you about what?

**Bertie:** That it's an outrage that I'm having to rewrite the goddamn script. It was a work of art already!

**Freddie:** I don't know about a work of art, but I've just found out that my part has been cut to shreds, and I want to know why.

**Frances:** **(Sensing trouble.)** Right, well, if you'll excuse me, I have schedules to sort out.

...

*[Continued in the full Murder Mystery Pack.]*