

Portrait of Murder Production Notes

Format

The play consists of three parts: An improv section, a scripted segment and a rhyming denouement. A sit-down dinner is part of the event.

- *Improv Section*

The first two acts of the play are performed with the dialogue being improvised by the actors. This part of the script contains extensive information about what to say and when to say it. Audience members are encouraged to interact with the cast and ask questions to get the character's background, relationship with other characters and what they think is going on.

- *The Murder Takes Place*

When the murder takes place, the character who plays 'The Detective' in the play comes forward and takes charge. The audience is told to take their places at the dinner tables and to start eating.

- *Songs and Talent Show (optional)*

In the original production, to help entertain the audience during dinner, cast members sang songs of the day, and fictitious songs made up concerning the characters of the play.

- *Scripted Section*

Towards the end of dinner, there is a scripted part of the play, which contains word-for-word dialogue. In this segment, the 'Detective' interacts with the cast member by asking questions or making statements, to help reveal more clues for the audience.

- *Ballots (optional)*

To help make the performance more interactive and fun, each member of the audience is given a ballot, listing all the characters in the play. During dessert, the audience is asked to fill out the ballot by selecting which character they believe committed the murder and explain their motive. Cast members retrieve the ballots, which are then reviewed and tabulated by the stage crew.

- *The Dénouement*

The dénouement begins after everyone has had dessert and the ballots have been tabulated. This script is done in rhyming couplets. Characters explain why they are not the murderer, until there is only one person left. After each character is spoken to, they line up, ready for the curtain call.

- *Curtain*

Cast member take their bows.

Portrait of Murder Production Notes

- *Reading of ballots*

After the curtain call, the Director, or Stage Manager will come forward and announce which audience member correctly picked the murderer and the motive. If there are multiple winners, a draw will be made. It is also an opportunity to read out some of the more 'interesting' or funny motives. A certificate or prize could be awarded to the winner.

Venue

The venue for this play should be in a place where both actors and audience members can freely move around and interact with each other. It could be in a large hall, or outside in an open area. In the original production, the play was performed at the Cumberland Heritage Village Museum, which is situated on 100 acres.

This production is designed to have some sort of meal during the performance, so the location would require a place with enough room for tables and chairs for the entire audience, and if outdoors, sheltered from the sun and possible rain.

There also needs to be some sort of 'back stage' or green room area, away and out of sight from the audience. This is where the actors wait during scenes they are not in. It is specifically important to have a place to hide the person who is murdered, as they must be removed from the audience and not seen until the curtain call. It can also be a place for the cast and crew to eat during the dinner, however they are not to linger too long and are encouraged to mix with the audience during the meal time.

Newspaper

A critical prop for this type of play is a newspaper, that is 'sold' to the audience at the beginning of the show. In the original production of this play, the newspaper was printed on a 11 ½ by 17 sheet of paper, with print on both sides. It contained historical stories and photos of the time period, as well as fictitious stories with background information on the characters in the play. It also had the cast and crew list (as in a program) and some rules or guidelines for how the performance will unfold.

Sample Pages of Improv Section

Act One, Scene 1

Characters: Harry Wright

The audience has gathered to see the Cultural Exposition in the village. The Exposition will take place in the village 'Dance Hall', which for the purpose of the production is the area where the audience has dinner.

Enter HARRY. She mingles with the audience, telling her story, at the same time 'selling' her newspapers.

- Harry Wright (*a.k.a. Harriet*) is the youngest of the three Wright siblings. She is not the brightest crayon in the box, or sharpest knife in the drawer, but she is quite friendly and engaging with people. She sells the newspaper to the audience for five cents (*audience uses voucher or ticket to pay for newspaper*). It's her job to sell papers. She tells the audience that she doesn't get much money for it, but it's a living. Actually, she gives all of her money to her brother Dick. Dick is the oldest brother and thinks he is the "smart" one in the family and knows how to take care of money. Dick thinks that Harry will spend the money foolishly, on food and stuff. So he keeps it all for himself.
- Harry talks to the audience about the talent contest, referring to the article in the newspaper. She has heard that some people are coming from as far away as Carlsbad Springs. She adds that Miss Margaret, the owner of the dance hall, is very excited and hopes the contest will bring lots of business.
- Harry mentions the death of "poor Mr. Jones". Mr. Jones was a real good friend of Harry's oldest brother Thomas and was the storeowner's father-in-law.
- Harry explains that Thomas is a painter. A really, really, really, good painter. He painted the painting on the wall in the store. It's just like the one that got stolen from Mr. Blackpoole's galleries. Thomas painted it years ago. It's a copy of a famous "Vincent Van Gone."
- Harry says that Thomas saw the painting when he was young; when it was on loan at Mr. Blackpoole's studio and then came home and painted it from memory. Thomas has a portrait-graphic memory.
- Harry comments that the "Van Gone" painting just got stolen again, and points to the article in the paper. Bad luck seems to follow that painting.

Act One, Scene 2

Characters: Harry Wright, Dick Wright

Sample Pages of Improv Section

Enter DICK. He is wearing painting clothes.

- Dick sees Harry and asks her how many papers she has sold.
- Harry stumbles a bit and says she is not sure, but a lot and that she is going to everyone.
- Dick goes into a long rendition about knowing the friend of a friend who is the editor of the newspaper and it was this connection that got Harry the job of selling papers. He then demands that Harry turn over all the vouchers.
- Dick explains to the audience that he will redeem the vouchers for cash at the general store, which he will then put into a trust fund for Harry, for later.
- Dick explains that Harry is a bit simple and needs someone like himself to take care of her financial matters, until he can find her a husband....and that might be a long time...unless anyone in the audience is interested.
- After he gets the vouchers, Dick refers to the newspaper article about Hank Jones. He reads the part that says he died of a heart attack and laughs. He says that 'Old man Jones' was probably drinking too much of Miss Margaret's booze and fell in. Dick is surprised that his brother Thomas hasn't done the same. Dick had often seen Thomas and Hank Jones drinking while they are fishing.
- Harry gets upset and says Thomas does not drink booze, as it's prohibition and illegal. She says that it is only his 'tonic'.

HARRY leaves to sell more newspapers. DICK can 'begrudgingly' help if it's busy.

Act One, Scene 3

Characters: Thomas Wright, Dick Wright

Enter THOMAS. He is wearing a beret and a painting smock. He is carrying a large painting wrapped in cloth, tied with a strong rope.

DICK finds THOMAS.

- Dick is very excited. He has to talk to Thomas about something very important.
- Thomas tells Dick to settle down.
- Dick tries to take the painting from Thomas and asks if this is the painting he did of Georgie.
- Thomas tells him that is it and to leave it alone. It will be unveiled as a grand finale to the talent contest. And that is Mr. Blackpoole to him.
- Dick is very excited and tells Thomas that he has come up with a new way to paint homes that will be as simple as one... two... three. He is about to continue when he looks around at the audience and is a bit concerned. He wants to tell Thomas about his idea but is afraid

Sample Pages of Improv Section

someone in the audience may “steal” the idea. He turns to them and tried to get assurance that they are only here for the talent contest. He tells them to just carry on talking with each other and not pay him any attention... unless they would like to “invest” in his new painting method. If that is the case, they can listen, and he will talk to them later.

- Thomas tells Dick that he has nothing to worry about. No one in their right mind would be interested in any of his hair-brained ideas.
- Dick explains that he plans to use air bellows, like the type you use to get your fireplace going to paint walls.
- Thomas wonders how that could possibly work. The paint would just come out in a long stream, like a hose.
- Dick says that these bellows will be modified with a special nozzle on the end, so when you quickly squeeze the bellows, a fine mist of paint will come out. A few squeezes and the whole wall will be covered. It will revolutionize the way walls and houses are painted
- Thomas looks at him in utter disbelief and says that is the most ridiculous thing Dick has come up with... this week. He goes on about this being yet another one of Dick silly “quick rich” schemes that never amount to anything.
- Dick says that this time it is going to be different. He already has a fellow in Montreal that is ready to modify fireplace bellows as paint sprayers. Dick wants Thomas to come in the business as his partner. After all, Thomas is a painter. He can see it now: “*Wright Brothers – House Painters Extrordinaire. That’s French for extraordinary*,” Dick says. It gives the name a bit of class.
- Thomas tells Dick that he is an artist, and artists do not paint homes.
- Dick says that is fine. Thomas can be a “silent partner”, which brings up his next point.
- Dick reminds Thomas that a fancy lawyer from Montreal, Volpar Nuite, is arriving on the train today and wants to see Thomas about selling the land he inherited from Hank Jones. Volpar is offering Thomas \$500 dollars. With that money, they can start their painting business and in no time, they will be rich beyond their dreams.
- Thomas tells Dick that his is not going to sell the land, even if they offer him a million dollars. He reminds Dick that Hank left him the land, so he could have a quiet place to paint.
- Dick starts to whine and complain about having been a poor farmer all his life and this is his, he means their big chance to be rich. He points out that Thomas and Harry have been practically eating them out of house and home.
- Dick explains that it is hard enough to support his wife and four children, without the extra burden of taking care of Thomas and Harry. He says it is especially hard on him having to do all the cooking as his wife and children are away visiting his wife’s sister.
- Dick complains to audience members about how poor he is and how much better life would be if Thomas sold his land.
- Dick also has a problem remembering how many children he has, so he may say he has four one time, and five the next.
- Dicks says that Thomas hasn’t had a job in years and owes everyone in the village money. At least Harry earns some money selling papers.
- Thomas gets quite upset at the word “job”. With a great deal of emotion and expression, he

Sample Pages of Improv Section

tells Dick that he is an “artist” and it is his “job” to breathe life onto a canvass for the world to enjoy forever. With great gestures and emotion, he says he can paint as well as any of the “great masters”. He reminds Dick that the painting in the dance hall (*the area where the audience will be having dinner*) is a copy of a famous “Van Gone.”

- Thomas tells Dick that he painted that from memory when it was on loan to Blackpoole Galleries before the war.
- Dick says he has heard this story a hundred times.
- Dick also points out that it is a copy of the Van Gone painting that was recently stolen. He could have a copy of the paper and refers to the article in the paper about it.
- Thomas reminds him of his ‘portrait-graphic mind’. It’s why he was such a good war artist. Can’t carry an easel on the front lines, you know.
- Thomas say that if you put the original beside it, you wouldn’t know which was the real one and which was the one he painted.
- As for having the “occasional” meal with Dick and Harry, Thomas says that he doesn’t like cooking for one.
- Dick says that he is only thinking of Thomas. He acknowledges that Thomas is a brilliant “artist” and the whole idea of the painting business is to give Thomas the freedom he needs to paint. And if he should happen to make some money, well that would be an added bonus. But really, he is only concerned in Thomas’s wellbeing. Besides, if Thomas were financially secure, he could finally get married. Dick’s goal in life is to have both of his siblings married off. He wonders if Thomas’s friend Georgie, who is rich might be interested in Harry.
- Thomas is adamant. He will not sell the land and he is not too fussy about getting married just now. And he warns Dick to keep Harry away from Georgie but doesn’t explain.
- Dick tells Thomas he hopes that Volpar Nuite can persuade Thomas to sell the land.

DICK leaves and mixes with the audience to talk about the painting he did for Georgie. He occasionally rubs his shoulder and tells the audience his old war injury is acting up. He sometimes pulls a flask from his hip and takes a drink, ‘for the pain.’

Towards the end of Act One, DICK needs to exit and then return with VOLPAR and BENNY in Act Two.

Act One, Scene 4

Characters: Thomas Wright, Margaret Smythe

Sample Pages of Improv Section*Enter MARGARET*

- Margaret sees Thomas drinking from the flask. She takes it away from him and says it's too early in the day for him to be drinking.
- Thomas looks around and asks what about the patrons. It's not too early for them.
- Margaret says they are different. They are paying for their 'tonic'.
- She demands that he gives her his key to her 'tonic trunk', the trunk where she keeps all her 'tonic' locked up.
- Thomas says that he does not have it on him, it is at home.
- She says that anybody could go in his house and get it and then get into her trunk. Thomas never locks his house.
- He tells her not to worry. He keeps the key in his pet snake's cage. No one would dare reach in there.
- Thomas says that he keeps the flask for rainy days when his war wound act ups.
- Margaret reminds him that it's sunny out.
- Thomas changes the subject and tells her what a wonderful job she has done to prepare the dance hall for the talent contest. He also remarks on how pretty she looks today.
- Margaret warms up to Thomas and tells him he can smooth talk his way out of anything.
- She says that the talent contest has really brought in a lot of business. She is doing very well this year. Well enough that they should start thinking about setting a date for their wedding.
- She asks Thomas to be on the lookout for those temperance people. She doesn't want any trouble and she has heard they are looking for support for the upcoming referendum on prohibition.
- Thomas quickly points out that Margaret should get back to her customers. They all look quite thirsty.

MARGARET leaves. Thomas pulls another flask out and takes a drink.

Act One, Scene 5*Characters: Ilene Onnya**Enter ILENE*

- Ilene Onnya has just arrived on the train from (*large city in area*).
- She immediately asks the audience for directions to Miss Margaret Smythe's establishment.
- She has been sent by the WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union) to put a stop to alcohol consumption in the village.
- She mingles with the audience and asks people to sign pledge cards and to abstain from any liquor.

Act One, Scene 6

Characters: Nigel and Carmen Vallant, Thomas Wright

Enter NIGEL and CARMEN.

NIGEL is carrying a box or case of some kind, that contains the prize for the Cultural Exposition. The box needs to have a lid that opens and closes and is easy for NIGEL or other people to carry. The prize can be anything about the size of a loaf of bread. In the original production, it was a violin in a case.

CARMEN has a large bag or purse containing guest lists, menus, seating orders, and other documents pertaining to her Cultural Exposition. She occasionally takes them out to discuss with cast members and the audience.

- Thomas and Nigel were in the Great War. Nigel was an officer and Thomas was a war artist. Nigel retired from the army and then went into the Foreign Service. He works in Ottawa and but travels a lot. It's been some time since he has been in the village.
- Nigel and Carmen find Thomas.
- They talk about the "good old days" and say they must not let such a long-time pass before they see each other again.
- Thomas asks about Nigel's work. Nigel is very evasive and says something about boring government business and how he writes long, boring reports.
- Thomas thanks Carmen for organizing the talent contest. It has really brought a lot of excitement to the village.
- Carmen gets upset and says it is not a 'talent contest'. It is a 'cultural exposition.'
- Nigel explains that Carmen's great Aunt recently passed away and left Carmen with a large sum of money, with the provision that she spends it on the development of the arts.
- Carmen points out that has always been very excited about the opera. She has taken singing lessons all her life, and although she fancies herself another Emma Albani, she could never be a real opera singer. So instead she will go across the country searching for people who have the gift for opera, but do not have the 'financial advantages' she has had. She will use Great Auntie Hilda's money to uncover 'hidden opera treasures.' She feels like those people who dug up dead people in Egypt. Except her treasures are alive. Great Auntie Hilda would be so

proud.

- Nigel tries to tell Carmen (for the hundredth time) that not everyone will be singing or performing opera, but Carmen will not listen. It's a cultural exposition; therefore, people will be performing opera. To her there is no other music. She was even named after a famous opera character (from Bizet). She has no real concept of what the world is about, and only sees things from her perspective.
- Carmen keeps talking about bringing culture to the 'poor common folk.'
- Carmen pulls out some papers from her bag, waves them, saying she has a million things to do and flitters away.
- Nigel shows Thomas the box containing the prize for the contest. He tells Thomas it is quite valuable and asks Thomas where he should put it. Can't leave something like this just lying around.
- Thomas says they should put it in the storage trunk. It's got a strong lock. That's where Margaret keeps all her "tonic". But he left his key in the snake cage.
- Nigel asks if that old snake is still alive. Thomas brought it back with him from a European pet shop. Isn't he worried someone will get bitten?
- Thomas says he keeps the lid shut tight.
- Thomas says that Carole (who works for Margaret) and Margaret have keys.

THOMAS and NIGEL leave, searching for a key.

CARMEN mixes with the audience, looking for potential opera singers in the audience.