

ACT ONE

The play is set in the drawing room at Danesbury Hall, a large and run down Victorian country house. The Hall has been let for the weekend to 'Murder Incorporated', a company specialising in 'Murder and Mystery weekends'.

Centre is the main double door, normally left open, which leads onto the hall. An arch upstage left leads to the "servant's", i.e. organiser's rooms. Left is a fairly discrete bar, right is a settee. There is a bookcase with reference works. The set may be decorated to taste with classical busts, potted plants etc., but overall the impression is more of decayed comfort than formality.

Bert is discovered behind the bar, putting the finishing touches to setting it up. Enter Val with a bloodied axe. She wears slacks and a smart sweater and is fully made up.

Val There you are. I've got something for you.

Bert (Anxiously.) You mean?

Val Yes. Have you got a minute?

Bert Well, I was expecting...

Val This won't take a moment. I've got your pension statement together. I'm sorry it's taken so long, but you've not had the most straightforward time with us. (Gives Bert an envelope.)

Bert Thanks. (Comes from behind the bar, opens envelope and reads.) Surely this can't be right?

Val I'm afraid so.

Bert But, I've been putting in for over nine years. Surely..

Val Don't forget your time out in Patagonia.

Bert Even so. I'm not very happy about this, Val.

Val Bert, believe me I've done the best I can for you.

(Enter Sharon, holding a pistol.)

Sharon This is it, you bastard, you've taken enough. I've had enough.

Bert What? Oh. No. Oh God. No. I didn't know she was your friend. I swear. You can't do this. I'll do anything. Please.

Sharon You swine. Did you have any mercy on her? You deserve everything you get.

Bert Oh, God.

Sharon Shooting is too good for you. All you men want is possession. Preferably freehold.

(Bert leaps behind the settee. Sharon aims one handed and pulls the trigger twice. Nothing happens. Bert stands up behind the settee.)

Bert You know what this means, don't you?

Sharon Yes. I forgot the safety catch.

(Sharon slips the catch and fires twice as Bert dives behind the settee.)

Sharon You bastard. You bastard. I really must remember about the safety catch in future.

Val Why did you fire single handed? Surely you'd get a better aim if you used both hands.

Sharon I think it loses impact if I spend time getting into the correct position.

(Bert rises from behind the settee.)

Bert That's a fair point. Hey, look at the time. I'd better go and start dinner.

(Exit Sharon to the hall, still trying her stances with the pistol.)

Val How are things in the kitchen?

Bert A little better since we found the wellies. It's not the best one I've seen.

Val What can you expect in a country house that's run down to the point that they'll rent it to us for the weekend.

Bert Yes. My point exactly.

Val The guests are paying for the atmosphere. A murder mystery in the Agatha Christie tradition. The genuine country house surroundings are one of the attractions.

Bert So are the dinners, if last week's complaints are anything to go by.

Donna (Enters.) Well, I've found my room. It shouldn't be too uncomfortable. Once I've got used to it.

Val Hello, Donna. Is there anything we can do? Have you met Bert? He does the catering, among other things.

Donna Were you responsible for lunch?

Bert I hope it was to your liking.

Donna I always feel cold fish should be served from a bucket. And to penguins.

Val Have you started your article yet?

Donna Tell me about the murders. Who solves the crimes? Do your customers elect a foreman?

Val The guests work things out alone or in teams, as they please. Though to be honest, and please don't print this, some groups do have problems.

Donna So what happens then?

Val I've been thinking of having someone who can play a resident detective. Drop a few clues if the guests get nowhere. There's no doubt some of them are hopeless.

Bert I'd better get off to the kitchen. By the way, the asparagus didn't show up.

Val (With forced patience.) Never mind, Bert, it won't be long now. (To Donna.) Bert retires soon.

Bert Yes, at the end of next month I can kiss my frying pan goodbye. There was none of this when I started, you know.

Val None of what?

Bert Pandering to nonsensical whims. People just ate what we put in front of them.

Donna Really? Where was that?

Bert In the Navy. How many for dinner?

Val I wish I knew. Hardly anyone has arrived yet.

Bert You should have seen the pea soupers in London in the fifties.

Val They can't have been as bad as this.

Bert No. I don't suppose they were.

Val The worst of it is that most of the cast haven't got here yet either.

Bert At least you won't have to pay them. I remember once in Bengal

Val Is that the time? I've a lot to do still. Just cook for the numbers we originally said. We can always give them a buffet from the leftovers tomorrow.

Bert You're the boss. (Exits.)

Val Would you like me to show you how we set out the props, or would you rather see how things develop?

Donna As you don't seem to have the bar open yet, I think I'll unpack.

Val I'll see you later then.

(Val exits behind the bar, and Donna to the hall going stage left. Adam looks cautiously into the room before entering from the hall, coming from stage right. He is dressed in his street clothes, and carries a scruffy grip. He comes into the room and begins to look around. He inspects one or two objects as if sizing them up. Footsteps are heard. Adam hides behind the bar. Enter Sharon from the hall. Sharon carries a box of accessories for the murder weekend. She gets out an ashtray and starts polishing it. Adam, unseen by Sharon, peeps out from behind the bar, sees Sharon, stands up and is about to attract her attention. Before he can say anything, Val appears in the hall doorway, and Adam hastily ducks down.)

Val Ah, there you are Sharon. Have you dealt with the ashtrays?

Sharon I've put the dog ends in the dining room, including the one on the carpet, and I'm just doing this room now.

Val Know your brief?

Sharon I think so. It's quite a simple one this time.

Val The snag is whether we can start on time. What worries me is that there's only you and Bert arrived yet. I've asked Bert to take a part.

Sharon Oh, god. He's hopeless.

Val It is a risk. He's been a bit temperamental with his retirement coming up. But at least he's here. I shall have to take a part too. In fact if no one else turns up we're all going to have to double up.

Sharon So long as the money doubles up too.

Val The usual arrangements, of course. You carry on here, I'm going to check the guest rooms. You know how the cleaners left them last time. Besides Donna Washington, there's only one couple arrived so far.

Sharon I've not seen anybody yet.

(Exit Val. Sharon fills the ashtray, checking various items against a list. Once again Adam, unseen by Sharon, peeps out from behind the bar, sees Sharon, stands up and spreads his arms out to her. Before he can say anything, Bert enters through the hall doorway, and Adam ducks down again.)

Bert I don't like cooking for everyone when there's only six here altogether. When I was young it didn't do to waste food.

Sharon Those were the days. Tell me about them inventing trains again.

(Bert reacts. Doorbell rings.)

Sharon More guests, probably.

Bert You should have been a detective.

(Sharon Will you get the door for me?

Bert What's the matter? You're supposed to do that.

Sharon Please. I've got all these dog ends to plant.

Bert But Oh, very well then.

Sharon I owe you one, Bert.

(Bert exits through the double door, going stage right. Sharon exits behind the bar. Bert, holding Lizzie and Joe's coats and cases, stands in the hall archway.)

Bert Perhaps you'd like to wait in here while I see about your room and key. (Exits left.)

Joe This would be a good time Lizzie. Do it now.

Lizzie Joe, it's not fair. It is their anniversary treat. And it was good of them to invite us.

Joe I'm not saying it isn't. Though they don't seem to like being on their own these days. I'm just saying that if we don't get something to keep us going.... You saw the letter.

Lizzie Perhaps I could have a word with Mum.

Joe That's no good. You know she can't do anything without your father. This is serious, we can't afford to fuff about. Perhaps I should talk to him myself.

Lizzie I'll talk to Dad next week. I promise. Leave it alone for now, Joe. Please.

Joe You swear?

Lizzie Oh, Joe, I've said I will. Please leave it alone.

(Joe glares at Lizzie, then switches to a smile as Martin comes from left to main doorway. Lizzie and Martin perfunctorily touch cheeks.)

Martin Lizzie, my dear! Come and have a drink. Joe!

Lizzie Hello, Dad.

Joe Hello, Martin.

Martin How was the journey? Joe look after you all right?

Joe Pretty frightful. They told us the buffet would close after Worcester. They didn't tell us that it wouldn't be open before Worcester.

Martin Dreadful weather. We arrived before it got too bad.

Joe We had trouble getting a taxi at the station. We tried five before we got one to come up here. Afraid they'd not be able to see the meter to overcharge us, I suppose.

Martin Still, all here now. What's it to be? (He rings the small bell on the bar.)

Lizzie There was a very strange man on the train. He gave me the creeps.

Martin (Genuinely concerned.) What kind of strange? Are you all right?

Joe He was fairly harmless. There's worse things than train spotting.

Lizzie He was reading old bus timetables. He kept on telling us about unlikely connections.

Martin Still, he won't have followed you here. Where is that man? (Rings the bell.)

Adam (Standing up behind bar.) Did you say bus timetables? I found an interesting one down here. 1947.

Lizzie Ohhh!

Joe Ah! Oh! Hello. There you are again! What a coincidence. The proverbial bad penny.

Lizzie You startled me.

Adam Sorry. Quite engrossed down there.

Martin Are you running this bar?

Adam Bar? Oh, I see what you mean.

Martin Well, are you? We've been waiting quite some time.

Adam Sorry.

Martin Sorry you're not, or sorry we're waiting.

Adam I'm not the barman.

Joe How did you get here? I thought we'd got the only taxi.

Adam I put my bike in the guard's van.

Martin Have you managed to get a drink yet?

Adam No. Actually I haven't tried.

(Bert appears in the doorway as Martin rings the bell furiously.)

Bert You rang, sir?

Martin Yes, dammit. I'll have a large whiskey. Not a word to your mother, Lizzie. You know what an old woman she can be. What'll you have?

Lizzie Dry white wine please, Dad.

Martin Joe?

Joe I'll have a small beer, thanks, Martin.

Bert Well, sir, I'm not quite sure. I'm on the catering staff.

Martin Come on man. What happened to customer service?

Bert The acting staff normally run the bar.

Martin (Passing Bert a banknote.) It's very good of you.

Bert Always happy to oblige, sir.

Martin Do I know you?

Bert Hardly likely, sir.

Martin Yes, surely. You were in the navy. (Pauses.) No, no, I'm sorry. I'm mistaken.

Bert Probably as well, sir.

Martin Yes. Probably as well.

(Bert gets the drinks while the action continues. Martin is lost in thought.)

Joe Good of you to invite us, Martin. What's the set up? When do we get bumped off?

Martin What? Oh, I'm sorry. Yes I believe there's a briefing before dinner. (To Bert.) Isn't that right?

Bert Yes, sir. The idea is you soak up the atmosphere of a remote country house in more leisured times. The classic days of the detective novel. The long afternoon of empire. Six pounds thirty eight please. Or will you have it on your bill, sir?

Martin Better pay cash. Here's a tenner, keep the change. But not a word to the wife, mind. She keeps saying the doctor won't like it. Can't make it sink in that I am a hospital administrator. I should think I know better than any doctor what's good for me.

Bert (Holding note to the light.) Thank you, sir.

(Enter Connie. Martin does not bat an eyelid, but passes the whiskey on to Adam.)

Martin Ah, there you are dear. They seem to have arrived all right. I'm just getting them in. Usual?

Connie Hello, dears. (Kisses Lizzie and Joe.) Just a fruit juice.

Martin Make that two please. Put it on the bill, would you?

Bert Yes, sir.

Adam (Sipping drink.) Ugh!

Martin Not a good brand?

Connie What awful weather.

Joe We were lucky to get here. Fog in November is liable to take British Rail by surprise.

(Bert leaves to the hall. Adam gets the timetable from behind the bar and goes to sit on a chair away from the rest of the party. Lizzie and Connie sit on the settee, Joe and Martin stand near them.)

Martin Well, we've got here. (Raises his glass and makes the toast very formally.) Absent Friends.

Connie Don't upset yourself, dear.

(Joe turns to look closely at a picture on the wall, Lizzie puts a hand on Connie's arm.)

Lizzie It will be all right, Mum.

Connie I know. It's not as though we hadn't heard anything. Your father takes it very badly, you know. (Brightly.) I'm not sure about this Murder and Mystery. It was your father's idea.

Martin Come on now. You've always been fond of Agatha Christie.

Lizzie But you're the real buff, Dad. Did you know that until I was ten I thought all grown ups books were about detectives?

Connie (Laughing quietly and sadly.) You've never told me that before, dear.

(During the above, Adam busies himself with a rubber band and a bottle, rigging a booby trap. Enter Val and Donna. Val is in a very smart suit with a cravat / tie. She carries a clip board.)

Val Hello, everyone. Welcome to Murder Incorporated. I'm Valerie Oxshott. I hope you'll all call me Val. May we introduce ourselves? This is Donna, who is (Donna shakes her head.) er, here to enjoy herself, as indeed are the rest of us. (Smiles brightly, turns to Martin.) You would be?

Martin Sawley. This is my wife, Mrs. Sawley, my daughter, Mrs Lizzie Sutton, and my son-in-law, Joe Sutton.

Val Please call me Val. May we use forenames?

Joe Use five if you like.

Donna I always feel a poor pun is like breaking wind. Of no possible pleasure to anyone other than the perpetrator.

Martin Use forenames by all means.

Val Mmm?

Martin Mmm.

Val May I ask what they would be?

Connie I'm Connie, and my husband is Martin.

Val (Checking her clipboard.) Please make yourselves at home. Moving on. (Turns to Adam.) What about you?

Adam (Deep in the timetable.) I've still got this whiskey, thanks.