

Murder Mystery Events: Playing, Myth-making, and Smashing the Fourth Wall, All at Once

William W. French and Janet Worthington

Murder mystery theatre-events exploit the American love for detective fiction, the producers assuming their audience's familiarity with the character types and the formulas of the genre. In following its fictional source, the form satisfies what Thomas Porter calls "deeply felt, vague and unformulated needs in the audience"¹ and may even constitute a contemporary equivalent of ritual. The basic ritual involves crime and punishment; guilt and innocence inform it. The pattern therefore serves to reassure its audience; the event neither questions any moral values nor threatens any social standards or ethics. The criminal has committed a serious crime; the audience-players must exercise justice. Audience-players themselves forestall the threat to the social order, working in concert with the actors. Audience involvement, therefore, in the ritual assumes critical importance. Also, the typical murder mystery event recreates a purgation ritual. Such rituals purge the pollution assumed to result from the commission of sinful deeds. A sub-conscious purgation may therefore take place for some audience-players. As John Sisk says, "We all aspire to crime, we are all guilty, we hunt ourselves down and punish ourselves in expiation."²

But above all, murder-mystery events are fun. The audience-players are able to take on a role other than the roles they play in daily life. They decide what role they wish to play—Sam Spade? Mrs. Marple? Sherlock Holmes?—and what direction they wish to take it in. According to producers of the events, some audience-members leap to their roles with great enthusiasm and play them to the hilt. Some waver, uncertainly beginning with one role and then changing direction mid-play. Most are acutely aware that they have an audience, not only the actors but the other audience-players, and this audience gives them a challenge and a reason to stretch their abilities.

The fun-element no doubt explains the popularity they have achieved since their development in the 1970s, when these interactive theatre games first became popular in the United States in performing venues such as resort hotels, urban restaurants, interurban trains, and luxury sea cruises. The fun element may,

William French is Professor of English at West Virginia University. He has published on Shakespeare and American drama and is currently completing a book on Maryat Lee's *Ecotheater*. Janet Worthington is Associate Professor of English at Nicholls State University. She has co-authored two books on teaching literature. She has participated in murder mystery events as author and actress.

however, obscure much else that is going on in murder mystery events. For one thing, these performances use theatrical space in such a way—an entire resort or other defined space becoming a theatre—that an unusual form of *parabasis* occurs, linking performers and audience. While the ludic function alone renders them superfluous to the conduct of everyday life and therefore distinct from ordinary life, the added effect of the bonds that may form between actors and audience-members may achieve some extraordinary effects. The spaces in which they occur also mark them as distinct and limited, as do their carefully drawn boundaries of time. These performance events properly belong, therefore, to the sphere of festival and ritual, to the sacred sphere in which Johan Huizinga places "play."³

Murder mystery events may function for some audience-players as festive celebrations of the sources and forms of middle-class professional entitlement and hegemony. The performances uniquely extend theatrical space in such a way as to escape the proscenium box and its alternatives. Audience-space and performer-space become one in a congruence that allows an imaginative transposition to occur, an extension of the theatrical space from "onstage" to "offstage" but within the "theatre," and thence to space beyond the theatre where audience and performers play out their lives. To many audience-players, these spaces then become simultaneously "real"—the locus of the everyday exercise of professional skills—and "theatrical" or symbolic space, redolent of the mysteries or crafts of social power which the ritual form celebrates. Thus, they achieve a curious dichotomous effect: while the form itself and the social rituals it enacts reflect conservative values and ideology, its theatrical dimensions and modes of enactment reflect radical, postmodernist agendas.

Murder mystery weekends originated in 1977 at Mohonk Mountain House in New Paltz, New York.⁴ Within a few years, resort hotels across the United States offered them, usually as part of a weekend package including two or three nights' lodging, meals, a banquet, a reception, and the right to participate in the performance. The Hyatt Hotel chain regularly scheduled them at twelve locations across the country. Mohonk Mountain House continues the tradition, last year selling out all 350 of its rooms for a murder mystery weekend. Prices generally ranged from \$200 to \$450 per person,⁵ running somewhat higher than that today. Such entertainment draws, for the most part, financially successful people, who are its natural audience.

Organizing a murder mystery performance differs decidedly from the techniques used for a more formal, traditional theatre piece. First, producers do not write out the play with specific dialogue and stage directions. Instead, they develop an improvisational sketch-script which consists of a detailed description of each character and a timetable that outlines the key events of the performance.⁶

Within these limits, the actors and the audience-players together assume responsibility for the shape of the final performance. Actors and audience-players alike--both behaving as if in a *commedia dell'arte* piece—expand their characters by choosing appropriate costumes, gestures, and historical details to round out their roles, the actors adding set pieces of dialogue and bits of business supporting the image that they believe the character should portray. The audience-players help the actors to bring some of this information to light by asking questions and conversing with them.

Weekend events follow a simple general formula. On Friday evening an occasion takes place at which a mock murder occurs. Police and ambulance are summoned, witnesses are questioned, evidence is gathered, suspects are identified, sometimes an arrest is made. Saturday, clues are dropped, interrogation takes place, the plot is complicated. At a Sunday gathering the identity of the murderer is revealed, after members of the audience have had a chance to guess the murderer and describe the motive and means. Of course, single-evening performances follow the same procedures, but the plot must unfold more quickly, and the guests must make their decisions between dinner and departure. Because audience members participate in this drama, the fourth wall is decisively smashed.

Whether professionals or amateurs, the actors have unique demands placed upon their talents, especially because many audience-players secretly wish to be actors. But while they play at or improvise their roles, they do not have complete control of the direction the story may take. Overly-eager audience-players, of course, pose all types of questions, and while a persona might lie about details relating to the crime, the actor must stay in character and respond appropriately to questions ranging from, "How long did you know the deceased?" to "What is your sexual preference?" So the unfolding of the story becomes a team effort, with the guests often providing the impetus for revealing a key clue. As the guests get involved in the performance, they too begin to establish their roles as actors. In fact, Sandie Castille, a regular performer with the Eddie May troupe in New Orleans, said that she believes all audience-players are "wanna-be actors."⁷ While some appear more shy than others, in the end, they all design their own roles and play a part which they themselves direct.

The amount of time they must spend "on stage" also places unusual demands on the actors. For much of the weekend, they have no chance to dash offstage to review lines or touch up makeup. They must stay in character for hours under the questioning and the probing eyes of the audience-players, some of whom would love to see them fall out of character, and sometimes bait them to do so. Even one-night productions offer no minor roles—every actor is under the scrutiny of some audience-players at all times and so must keep in character for many hours.

Producers of murder mystery events sometimes encourage audience-players to play the role of their favorite detectives: Philip Marlowe, Sherlock Holmes, Mrs. Marple. They may wear costumes; they must interrogate suspects and witnesses, follow up clues, meet and mingle "socially" with the characters, and finally must name the murderer and spell out his or her motives and means. Most respond to these encouragements and take the roles seriously, entering avidly into the play-game as a challenge to their expertise and wits and as a rare opportunity to ham it up. The winners are those who most effectively interrogate suspects, analyze clues, and engage fully in the hunt. Participation in the game appears to be the primary motivating factor for most audience-players, though winning occupies some. Interviews with murder mystery actors revealed that the actors believe that most audience-players selected and paid for this activity because they are looking for fun, especially the fun of being an actor while simultaneously playing a game.

Producers of the events assume their audience's familiarity with the character types and the formulas of American detective fiction. The basic ritual, of course, forms around crime and its punishment: the game-as-inquest determines guilt and innocence. The pattern reassures its players; the game-play neither questions moral values nor threatens social standards or ethics. The criminal has committed a serious crime, and justice must be exercised. The crime threatens social order, but the audience-players working in concert with the actors restores it. Audience involvement in the ritual constitutes, therefore, a critical element.⁸

Analysis of the way murder mystery plays use space reveals their ritualistic aspect. As a form of play, they are always limited, like any game, to a defined space. Such space, according to Huizinga, is a "consecrated spot," even though it may not be formally distinguished from the rest of a defined space, such as a playground.⁹ Similarly, a murder mystery event takes place in an arena set aside for other uses (a resort, restaurant, etc.) but invested by special rules of the play-element as a forbidden, isolated space. A similar effect occurs in other spaces formally distinguished from everyday space, such as temples, theatres, courts of justice, where form and function hedge out the ordinary world and render the spaces hallowed; they become a temporary world within the ordinary world, a space dedicated to the performance of an act apart. Inside this space an absolute order reigns, for play, as Huizinga analyzes it, both creates order and casts an enchanting spell; play evokes an essentially aesthetic experience involving rhythm and harmony. It does so in spite of the tension occasioned by the struggle of play.¹⁰ The theatrical space of a murder mystery event assumes a symbolic degree, therefore, and our example, a weekend event, the one given at Twin Falls State Park, West Virginia, in October 1986—typical of the

genre—shows how theatrical space is used for the performance of the ritual and what social values are enacted and celebrated. The performance at Twin Falls used values and socioeconomic conditions indigenous to the area. The plans began with a description of the victim, Harold Appleyard, an entrepreneur with holdings in coal, gas, and highway construction. The plot took shape by introducing relatives and business associates with clearcut motives. Throughout the process, Twin Falls resort and its surrounding area played a key role in establishing motives and the opportunities for carrying out the actual killing.

Before completing the story line, the Twin Falls company had to explore the space first-hand. On a reconnaissance visit to the resort, the actors had to modify key elements of the plot in order to fit the available space and facilities. One element eliminated was night walks by Bruce (later revealed to be the murderer), who dressed in miner's clothes, with coal dust covering his face. Because the actors did not have easy access to private washroom facilities, Bruce would have no way to remove telltale evidence before rejoining the assembled audience-players, or run the risk of being caught in the act by an audience-player, which would spoil the game.

Clearly, a murder mystery performance in a resort such as Twin Falls implies two conceptions of the use of space. While the theatrical space occupies the resort, and it is one space, it is also the many spaces where scenes may be enacted. Within the boundaries of the resort the actors are relatively free to range wherever their imaginations may take them—dining room, lobby, guest rooms, parking lot. The only restricted spaces are those used by the resort's employees. Such space is not a theatrical space in an architectural sense, though its function prevents its remaining an everyday, profane space. It is most properly a festive space, for affluent persons there celebrate their affluence. Qualitatively differentiated from everyday space, this space connotes luxury, ease, and physical pleasure, and is consecrated to celebrating the blessings of upper-middle-class life. Consequently, it is exclusive both in a physical sense and in a social sense, for it excludes those without the means to enjoy it. Murder mystery events are not, at least as they are currently organized, a democratic form of theatre.

Indeed, just the opposite obtains, for in the exclusive resort space many of the audience-players are celebrating the very skills that have made possible the way of life the resort symbolizes. These skills include observation, knowledge, and logic. Primarily middle and upper-middle class males and females comprise this group. While lawyers seem especially to enjoy this form of entertainment, teachers, retirees, high school students, even janitors and hairdressers have ordered up a juicy killing for entertainment. For a member of the audience to participate successfully in solving the crime, he or she relies on sharp observation of the clues provided: a crushed cigarette butt, a hint dropped in a seemingly

casual conversation, a biographical detail. Any kind of information may prove useful—a point of law, a business procedure, sports, religion, medical procedures, psychology. Finally, a process of deduction helps to solve the crime.

These same skills—observation, specialized knowledge, and exercise of deductive logic—procure professional success in our corporate, meritocratic society and secure entrance to the resort or restaurant in the first place. These skills not only provide the price of admission but also make it possible for an audience member to understand and appreciate the mystery and to solve the questions the performance raises. The performance is a ritual of power that brings a defined community together to reaffirm the shared skills, ideals, and values that have gained them entry into the festive space and to celebrate the reestablishment of social order.¹¹ Many of the producers of the events testify to the broad nature of the audience. While the more expensive weekend events may have attracted only the upper class, this configuration has yielded to a broader audience, to anyone with a few dollars who wants to spend an evening on a lark. Many audience-players do not care whether they win and just guess in an off-the-wall manner the identity of the murderer, simply enjoying the game for itself without exercising any mental skills. These events may also attract others who aspire to the professional upper-class, or some who are experiencing anxiety about changes in their material or cultural lives and are nostalgic toward the ordered world of the murder mystery event and its implied conservation of values.

For those, however, for whom the performance celebrates the knowledge and skills of professional life, the event recreates a communal ritual celebrating those skills that have gained them entry into the festive space. As an enacted ritual of crime and punishment a murder mystery weekend also celebrates the reestablishment of social order. Therefore, the boundaries of theatre—the resort or restaurant—may even become a momentarily sacred space, a space of communal triumph over crime, its punishment, and the expiation of guilt.¹²

Further, the resort as theatrical space allows some interesting transactions to occur between actors and audience; the free mingling, dining and drinking together, and playing games allow for a unique form of *parabasis*.¹³ Traditionally, *parabasis* refers to the direct address of chorus to audience in which the chorus turns to the audience and speaks directly to them, often dropping their characters.¹⁴ In the *parabasis* that occurs in a murder mystery performance, the actors may address audience-players in groups or singly, but they do not drop out of character. Some parts of the interaction are planned and take the form of a loosely-woven plot. In the Twin Falls scenario, two of the actresses engaged in a screaming, hair-pulling romp to quickly inform the guests of their mutual hatred. When members of the audience attempted to intervene,

they were told to stay out of the matter. Other interactions relied more on the audience-players to initiate a scene. One male suspect deliberately isolated himself and drank silently with his head down. The purpose of this behavior was to attract guests who would attempt to draw him out and entice him to reveal secrets in his background.

Furthermore, because the *parabasis* takes place in a socially significant festive space, any threat that the actors might pose in a conventional theatre space is blunted. In fact, the actors are more often the ones threatened. Sometimes they must cope with the drunken or unruly audience-player who would tear apart the entire illusion. To keep this from happening, different troupes have incorporated components such as the host or hostess responsible for presenting the rules and seeing that they are obeyed. Adding more hosts and restricting the movements of guests to certain areas can ward off the danger of audience-players undermining the actors. Sometimes actors can use their roles to control a rude audience-player. Jim Kuisk, who played the Mafia don in "Red Beans and Slot Machines," described his handling of a saucy guest. He called in his bodyguard, who always carried a "piece," and used him to threaten the malcontent, who then proceeded to fall on his knees and kiss the don's ring.¹⁵

While these disruptive audience-players make acting difficult, the most common problem actors face during a murder mystery event is having distinct roles to which they must adhere, so they work under the pressure of creating dialogue and gestures appropriate to those roles, regardless of what questions or situations the audience might present. Because the actors occupy the same festive space the audience occupies, that space becomes a communal space in a heightened sense. Additionally, while conducting a ritual that demands the exercise of the audience's skills, the actors exercise their possession of similar professional skills, and communal bonds may form. The audience express sympathy, disgust, admiration, or lust for the characters portrayed by the actors.

The *parabasis* in this case does not destroy any dramatic illusion. Like Greek new comedy, murder mysteries make no "consistent attempt at an illusionistic representation of reality."¹⁶ The ritual looks more like a game that mimics an aspect of professional middle-class life. The murder fools no one but is perfectly acceptable as such. But while no one is fooled, the audience-players do require that props, settings, and costumes meet the test of close scrutiny. No toy or prop gun will do in such a performance, because the audience is at liberty to judge it at close range. Stage make-up cannot be worn; for when the audience looks right into or touches the actors' faces, they must sustain the illusion. The mental attitude such effects induce mimic those that Huizinga argues pertain to sacred rites in ancient cultures. In such rites, which often assume the semblance of a contest involving certain skills, an underlying consciousness of things "not

being real" prevents the induction of complete illusion. No one, according to Huizinga, is duped by feigned madness or swaggering; as a result, expressions of terror are in part genuine and spontaneous, in part acting up to a part imposed by tradition or, in this case, the demands of the game. The element of "make-believe" remains voluntary: one chooses to be duped and to pretend that the game is for real.¹⁷

The personae may become illusions and recognized as such, but they remain for most of the audience actors hired for the game. But this *parabasis* may create an unusual sort of illusion, without Artaud's "vision of the 'elimination of the stage.'"¹⁸ This illusion does not consist of a sense that one is witness to "real" events or of a suspension of disbelief; it is not a theatrical illusion in the usual sense. This illusion proceeds from a sense of material well-being induced by the resort or restaurant space; it incorporates a sense of community, of being with kindred talents and people equally successful, and above all the illusion that one's professional powers extend to all realms of social life. It is a *professional* illusion, or in a ritual sense, an illusion of mystery.

In a murder mystery event the ordinary mimetic effects of theatre—set, lighting, dialogue, stage movement—become part of the audience-player's world and experience. The excitement of this stage setting is enhanced by the realistic objects and people that invade from the outside world. An ambulance roars into the setting, collects the "dead" body, and speeds off into the night. Solemn policemen search the area and ask pointed questions of the actors and audience-players. The existing facilities shape and reveal the scenes that peel away the actors' facades and reveal underlying motives and selves. A suspicious couple is spotted under the dim lights of the parking lot or a sobbing actress locks herself in the ladies room. In these ways, the customary mimetic theatrical effects expand to sweep in the audience-players and raise ordinary scenes to extraordinary levels.

The audience-players are "onstage" with the actors. The mimesis and the illusion are occasioned by the audience-player's capacity to enter into the game. When an audience-player forgets his otherness and engages in the hunt, the act of illusion is perfect and the mimetic effect is secured. Thus the mimesis implies not only a sense of being, but a doing or acting, an exercise of skills that secure power and participation in the festive activity being celebrated.

The concluding scene of the event assumes special importance to some of the audience-players, for in the final revelation of the murderer and her/his motive, winners and losers are sorted out. According to Huizinga, the essence of play is what is at stake. To win—in this case, to guess the murderer and his/her motive and means—is to show oneself superior to the other players, or audience, and thus to win esteem and honor. According to Huizinga, people

avidly desire to be praised and honored for excellence in play. This desire may be traced in the concept of *virtue* which the Renaissance inherited from the Greeks and which remains alive today. It signifies any number of desirable qualities, such as wit, sagacity, courage, strength, urbanity.¹⁹ In contemporary society, play-competition notably expresses *virtue*. But it is important to point out that some of the energy generated by the successful competitor passes from the individual to the group, so that the entire play-community shares in the celebration of *virtue*.²⁰

The virtue which play-competition rewards for winning is based on the antithetical and agonistic element of play. Play demands opposing contenders who must struggle; from the struggle emerges the winner. Huizinga finds a deep affinity between play and law because the actual practice of law in many contemporary societies resembles a contest. In ancient Greece, litigation was conceived as *agon* or a contest bound by fixed rules in which two contending parties invoked the decision of an arbiter. Justice was thought to take place in a court or sacred circle within which judges sit, the *temenos* or sacred spot cut off and hedged in from the "ordinary" world. Whoever steps into the *temenos* is sacrosanct for the time being.²¹ Huizinga also believes that a sporting element characterizes many legal practices, manifested in modern lawsuits as wrangling couched in a style and language that betrays a "sportsmanlike passion for indulging in argument and counter-argument."²² Therefore, the very real connection between jurisdiction and play is seen in the agonistic factor, each party seeking to "gain his cause." According to Huizinga, an ancient lawsuit was understood to be a contest, a verbal battle producing a winner and a loser. Where modern law understands a suit as a contest of right vs. wrong, murder mystery events abandon such ethical standards and return to the ancient agonistic element. The winner survives his ordeal, gains his cause, and thereby manifests his virtue.

At the conclusion of the play, when the crime is solved, the ultimate illusion is fostered: that the world outside the resort is as controllable as the world inside.²³ The "onstage" world has already been extended to the entire resort: the parking lot was perhaps the scene of a murder; "out there" becomes part of ~in here~ at the bar or in the dining room. The murderer's law office or clinic becomes an offstage space in which antecedent or simultaneous action is merely an imaginative extension of the action within the theatre. If the power of the mysteries—legal, medical, proprietary, scientific—works here, it extends there. In line with this perception, we may again invoke Huizinga, who discusses the important connections between playing and knowing. For archaic man, knowing was a form of magical power, a sacred mystery relating to the cosmic order itself. For ancient humans, competitions in sacred knowledge invoked the idea that the spoken word has a direct influence on world order. At sacred feasts,

hierophants put questions to one another, riddles with sacred import, the answer to which had to be found as a solution. The riddling game was an essential part of ritual ceremonies, the riddle itself conceived to be a sacred thing full of secret power.²⁴ The parallel between an ancient ritual riddle game and the mystery to be solved in a murder mystery event should be evident, for in the latter the mysteries of modern crafts come into play in deciding the identity of the murderer, his motive and means.

The riddle ritual, according to Huizinga, became an important element of early culture, a form of social intercourse as well as an invocation of the knowing that gave its possessors great power. Indeed, such knowers or seers paralleled the agonistic structure of the universe: the cosmos was seen as an eternal conflict of opposites; agon was a root-principle of existence, and the knower therefore possessed an advantage in the game of life. At the center of the playing circle stands the figure of the "Greek sophist," says Huizinga, the knower or seer whose business it is to exhibit knowledge, the mysteries of his craft. He must, moreover, defeat his rivals in public contest, just as an audience-player in a murder mystery must do. The knower's performance was an *epidexis* or exhibition of his special powers, always tested in a playful setting.²⁵

A murder mystery event may therefore foster for some audience-players the illusion that all the world's *my* stage, controllable and fixable by the exercise of professional skills. Such a theatrical setting takes the disposition of human affairs out of the hands of gods, removes the assignment of judgment and punishment from a deity, and places social life and individual human fate—at least within the limits of the theatrical experience as ritual of crime and punishment—in competent, managerial, legal, medical, meritocratic hands.

Furthermore, in a murder mystery weekend, the *parabasis* which occurs is that an entire cast steps forward, and *they* become *we* in a momentary crumbling of social distinctions and a celebration of the powers that distinguish those within the theatre from those without. In this *parabasis*, space extends to the whole social arena of capitalist competition and the scrambling for wealth, power, and the love of beautiful women (or handsome men). Theatrical space has unfrozen and melted out of a closely-bounded space, and now is congruent with the social and economic battlefield upon which the lives of the audience are fought.²⁶

The generally upper-class nature of the audience for murder mystery events suggests another congruence.²⁷ We began by saying that the form of the murder mystery events and the social rituals they enact reflect conservative values and ideology. That point should by now be apparent, as should the idea that the form and content of the events derive from American detective fiction. But the underlying patterns suggest mythic associations. The event resembles a quest in which the quester, using the exercise of technical mysteries, seeks to identify the

murderer—the destroyer of deeply entrenched social codes—and thus to fortify his society's claims to right values. The quest requires a descent into the criminal mind, the temptations of power and flesh, social iniquity. The quester conceives the murderer to be wily and audacious but subtle and highly motivated. Every member of the audience unites in exercising technical skill and wit to run the murderer to ground and to expunge him or her from the social body and thus to cleanse it. (The chase may also involve a search for a double, the outcast, criminal self of the quester.) When the quester locates the criminal, punishment may begin, and the purgation—socially and individually—is effected. This mythopoesis clearly re-enacts the conservation of social values such an audience desires.²⁸ A murder mystery event therefore addresses the keenest concerns of many in its audience: a need for recognition of their struggle for power and money and love, and a need to celebrate the skills that invest their social class with position and power, and a need to celebrate their powers in a communal act, perhaps for some a need to indulge in nostalgia, for other to compensate for social losses. The events also absorb the keenest concerns of the actors, who extend the fulfillment of those needs to their audience. If the murder itself and the conventions of the hunt bear little resemblance to reality, nevertheless the abridgement of social law threatens the hegemony of the audience's social class, while the hunt and its successful resolution allay that threat, and the play becomes a celebration of the audience's (and the performers') skills, values, and hegemony. Through such playing, as Huizinga attests, a society expresses its interpretation of life and the world.²⁹

Murder mystery plays certainly express the way contemporary American society inscribes its culture. They also serve to legitimate the existing social order and its audience's role in it. It is a theatrical form peculiarly suited to a politically and socially conservative era such as the late 1970s, 1980s, and early '90s, and it may wither and die as our society swings into new political and social modulations. On the other hand, when the political wheel of fortune turns again, such events may be strengthened by their appeal to anxious upper or middle class survivors using them to shore up their society against the incursions of those they identify as criminals, devils, and barbarians. Seen in that light, these events become a form of nostalgia. Seen from another perspective, the light-heartedness of murder mystery events may insulate them from any political change whatever, their ludic function carrying participants away from the ennui and emptiness of their consumer culture. The events are, after all, a safe way to embrace danger and risk and to test one's skill and imagination within a shell of safety.

In any case, murder mystery events are a form that deserves a hard look by theatre professionals wishing to extend the powers of theatre to an audience that

has forgotten those powers and that seeks an apparently frivolous form of entertainment. For what they may find fulfilled in this *play-acting* is not just frivolous fantasy roles but a ritual reenactment of important values. Especially at play is a rare sense of community in which cast and audience unite in a meaningful game that creates a socially-significant drama: actors and audience-players work together as a team to create a thing of beauty and to preserve social values. A sense of human completeness may be at stake. As Schiller says, "Man is only completely a man when he plays."³⁰

West Virginia University and Nicholls State University

Notes

1. Thomas Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1969) 185.

2. John P. Sisk, "Crime and Criticism," *Commonweal* LXIV (20 Apr 1959): 72.

3. *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1950). Huizinga identifies the chief function of play as a voluntary and disinterested transcendence of the immediate needs of life. Huizinga sees play as temporary activity satisfying in itself but also satisfying numerous communal and personal needs. See pp. 1-9. Our analysis of the ludic function of the murder mystery events is based on Huizinga's work.

4. Carol Lippincott, "Mystery Weekends Make Crime Pay," *Wall Street Journal* 26 Aug 1986: 24.

5. Jeanyne Thornton and Mary Galligan, "Foul Play Is No Crime on Whodunit Nights," *US News and World Report* 27 Jan 1986: 66-67.

6. See Appendix A for the improvisational sketch-script used for a murder mystery event performed in 1986 at Twin Falls State Park resort in West Virginia. This paper is based in part on Professor Worthington's participation as an actress in this murder mystery event.

7. Sandie Castille and Jim Kuisk, performers with the Eddie May Mysteries troupe, New Orleans, LA, telephone interview, 15 May 1992.

8. These theatre events may also recreate a purgation ritual. That is, certain elements of rituals that purge the pollution of sinful acts may be sub-consciously taking place for some audience-players. John Sisk says that, "We all aspire to crime, we are all guilty, we hunt ourselves down and punish ourselves in expiation" (72).

9. Huizinga 8.

10. 10.

11. It may be that some participants in these events are unconsciously seeking to resolve conflicts in a Freudian or Eriksonian sense. The events certainly allow a player to sidestep ordinary reality and enter a special world where psychic conflicts may be explored if not resolved. The very speculative nature of this possibility is better left to those with psychoanalytic skills. See Robert E. Neale, *In Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 21-28.

12. This point is derived from Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New York: Yale UP, 1955) 99.

13. K. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley: U California P, 1972) 49-53.

14. Niall W. Slater, "Transformations of Space in New Comedy," *The Theatrical Space*, vol. 9 of Themes in Drama, ed. James Redmond (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987) 2.

15. Castille and Kuisk interview.

16. Slater 3.

17. Huizinga 22.

18. Stephanie D. Arnold, "Multiple Spaces, Simultaneous Action, and Illusion," *The Theatrical Space*, vol. 9 of Themes in Drama, ed. James Redmond (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987) 260. For an interesting parallel, see also Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (New York: Grove, 1958) 125.

19. See Huizinga 63-75.

20. 50.

21. 77.

22. 77.

23. We are extending a concept advanced by Hanna Scolnicov in "Theatre Space, Theatrical Space, and the Theatrical Space Without," *The Theatrical Space*, vol 9 of Themes in Drama, ed. James Redmond (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987) 11-26.

24. Huizinga 105.

25. 146.

26. This point extends the thinking of Jonathan Haynes, "The Elizabethan Audience on Stage," *The Theatrical Space*, vol 9 of Themes in Drama (New York: Cambridge UP, 1987) 64-65.

27. "Upper class" also designates audience-players who may not have the income or education to fit into an official definition, but who aspire to be "upper-class," or want to think of themselves as such. The term may also cover those who are experiencing personal setbacks but who are anxious to retain their identity as such.

28. We are using the concept of "myth" here in a new historicist sense. The sequence of events is chosen by the myth-maker to accommodate his own objectives and to achieve particular effects in his audience. The acting out of the myth further binds play-makers, actors, and audience into a confederacy to conserve existing values and social structures. See William Blake Tyrrell and Frieda S. Brown, *Athenian Myths and Institutions: Words in Action* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) 3-13.

29. Huizinga 46.

30. Qtd in Neale 21.

Appendix A:

Improv Sketch Script: A Murder Mystery Weekend Performance at Twin Falls State Park, West Virginia, October 1986

Written by: Gary, Gene, and Jan Worthington and Karen Vuranch

The Crime

Harold Appleyard, head of Appleyard Enterprises, is found murdered in his lodge room at Twin Falls State Park. Appleyard had come to Twin Falls to receive a humanitarian award for his contributions to the arts and humanities

organizations of the area. A number of his family members, friends, and business associates have come with him to celebrate his receiving this prestigious award.

Harold Appleyard, age 57, has a ruddy complexion, is balding, graying, wears glasses, and limps from reconstructive knee surgery necessitated by a gunshot wound. He married Helene Straussman in 1984, and was previously married to Judith Smythe (1958-84), with whom he had three children: Harold, Jr. (b. 1959), Sharon (b. 1961), and Leslie (b. 1962). His hobbies include hunting, fishing, and golf. He is about to receive a humanitarian award for public service because he gives money to art and community service projects. His one quirk is that he always carries a 1957 silver dollar in pocket.

The Suspects

Helene Appleyard is Harold's second wife (married, 1984). She was the founder and head of a public relations firm that did work for Appleyard Enterprises. Helene was having an affair with Philip Vernon, a business associate of Harold's, before she met Harold, but she dumped Phil for Harold. Helene had been buying into Harold's company, and with what she stands to inherit from Harold, she will have controlling interest in Appleyard Enterprises. Harold divorced Judith to marry Helene.

Philip Vernon is executive vice-president of Appleyard Enterprises. He is jealous of Harold's wife and Harold's power. Phil is next in line to be president of the company, but with Harold dead, Helene has controlling interest. Helene has been leading Phil on again, getting him to help her accumulate stock in the company. She has told him that they will kill Harold, and that she and Phil will marry, and Phil will be president of the company. After the reading of the will, Helene meets Phil to tell him she does not need him anymore.

Harold Appleyard, Jr., the son of Harold and Judith, left home in 1978 to pursue an acting career. Harold, who had no college education, was always bitterly disappointed that Jr. did not do well in school. Jr. does not like his father browbeating him and constantly embarrassing him. When Junior left home to become an actor, Harold stopped helping him, and at the same time began to contribute to arts and humanities projects.

Harold, Jr., was hunting with Harold some years ago. Senior kept humiliating Jr. until Jr. finally shot at his father with intent to kill, wounding him in the knee. Senior never stopped taunting Jr. about being too cowardly to kill him. Additionally, Jr. was going to be cut out of his father's will because Senior had just found out that Junior is gay.

Judith Smythe Appleyard is Harold's ex-wife. Judith shows up for the award ceremony claiming that she is as much a deserving recipient as Harold

because many of the projects that his money sponsored were her ideas. She is really there to embarrass Helene and Harold, for she is still in love with Harold, and she has just found out that Helene is pregnant. Helene is furious and jumps on Judith. Helene has also convinced Harold to try and work out a new fiscal arrangement for Judith, leaving Judith with less income now and no money after his death.

Bruce Wilson is the head of the "Together We Build" organization which is giving Harold the award. He had been a higher management official in a coal-related Appleyard subsidiary, which recently was dissolved. He was offered an inferior position at a lower salary, but since he supports a family of five children and his mother, who is in a nursing home, he took the new job. Part of the new position is to direct the charitable drives within the company. This charitable organization is the one giving Harold the humanitarian award. Bruce's father was slain by Harold in 1957 when Bruce was ten, leaving his mother and him destitute. His poverty and his mother's bitterness motivated him to become a successful businessman.

Maria Wisenslonski is Bruce's mother. Bruce changed his name when he realized that his mother, and his mother's name, would be an embarrassment to him in his pursuit of a business career. She is an old woman, confined to a wheel chair, who sneaks out of the nursing home to attend the party for Harold.

Susan Samples, Harold's lawyer, is at the resort because Harold is in the process of writing a new will. The lawyer has been skimming money off Harold's subsidiaries, such as the one Bruce worked for, and that is why it went bankrupt. A letter is found in Harold's room from his accountant saying that a discrepancy has been found in the final accounting of that company and implicating the lawyer.

Billy Joe Pommay, a backwoods type, is Harold's hunting and fishing buddy. Pommay was Harold's best friend and the one eye-witness to the shooting of Harold's knee. In 1957 he went to jail for a theft that Harold actually committed. He was not aware that Harold had done the deed. In fact, he is Harold's brother, who wrote off society long ago because he loved Judith Smythe, and she chose Harold over him. He changed his name to protect Harold and Judith from any embarrassment—Pommay from Billy Joe's incorrect pronunciation of pomme.

Schedule of Key Events

Friday Evening

- 8:00 Cocktail party begins. Bruce is the first to arrive and begins mingling with the guests.
- 8:15 Harold, Helene, Phil, and Susan arrive. Bruce welcomes them and bestows great praise on Harold. Social chatter.
- 8:20 Billy Joe arrives and greets Harold. He is hostile to Helene.
- 8:30 Judith and Junior arrive. Judith begins telling everyone that she deserves the award. Junior confronts his father and is sarcastic and offensive to him. Phil flirts with Helene.
- 8:45 Maria arrives, sneaks around, talks to Billy Joe, and eventually confronts Harold about nine o'clock. Her son Bruce avoids her.
- 9:00 When Maria badmouths Harold, Judith champions her, but Helene tries to shut her up. Judith and Helene have words, but Harold intercedes. Harold and Susan then leave the party to do some work. As they leave, Susan's briefcase tumbles open, exposing a gun.
- 9:10 Maria tells Billy Joe that Harold set him up. Billy Joe leaves to talk to Harold about this.
- 9:15 With Phil's help, Bruce takes Maria out. Phil returns immediately, but Bruce is gone at least 35 minutes. Susan returns and heads to the bar.
- 9:20 Helene and Judith have an argument and engage in a hair-pulling, face-punching fight. Phil and Hal finally break it up. Helene and Phil leave. Billy Joe returns and has some brandy.
- 9:40 Judith and Hal return. She has been in the restroom putting herself back together after the fight with Helene.
- 9:45 Judith spots Phil and Helene kissing under the parking lot lights.
- 10:00 Maria returns saying that Harold is dead. Billy Joe and Phil go to check it out. Soon after, an ambulance arrives, and Harold's body is whisked off. A state policeman arrives and tells everyone present that they are not to leave. Park hostess hands out the clue packets.

Saturday

- 7:30-10:00 Breakfast
- 8:00-10:00 Murder room open for viewing
- 10:00-12:00 Interrogation of suspects in various spaces
- 12:00-1:30 Lunch
- 1:30-3:00 Murder room open for viewing

- 3:00 Police report, reading of will by Susan, media interviews
6:00 Cocktails
6:30 Dinner
7:30-9:00 Farewell tribute to Harold, a memorial service in
which each suspect speaks, and additional clues are dropped

Sunday

- 7:00-9:00 Breakfast
9:30 All solutions must be in to front desk
9:30 The revelation of the murderer and his/her motives

Rules of the Game

Round-robin interviews held Saturday morning. Ten to twelve people may participate in each session.

Each audience-player submits her/his conclusion in a sealed envelope at the front desk. The front desk staff person will write on the envelope the time it is submitted. Each participant may submit only one guess, and it must be in before 9:30 AM Sunday. The guess must name the murderer and the motive and the means.

Harold's room at the lodge should be available between certain hours to guests to examine. The room should be cordoned off, and audience-players may not take clues from the room.

A packet is given to each audience-player that includes rules, an ID button, a dossier on each suspect including a photograph, and biography of Harold.

Audience-players are encouraged to dress as their favorite detective, but this is not a requirement.

Suspects will be lodged separately, in a cabin, indicated to participants as "backstage" and off limits.

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