

QUEEN of the SILENT SCREAM

A ONE-ACT MYSTERY-COMEDY

By Craig Sodaro

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STORY OF THE PLAY

When Detective Larry Stark of the Los Angeles Police Department takes on the murder of Norma Starr, the Queen of the Silent Scream, he quickly finds himself facing a clever adversary.

Norma, one of the last great silent screen stars, made her share of enemies during her career, and it seems she's gathered all of them for her birthday celebration: C.B. Darling, the director; Maxine Comet, a rising starlet ready to jump into any picture Norma refuses; Juliet, Norma's nervous maid; E.Z. Bucks, Norma's shifty agent; Romeo Valentine, a handsome matinee idol; Freddie Willis, her costume designer who takes more than her share of credit for Norma's preservation; and Evie St. John, her oldest friend who carries a dangerous secret.

As they all watch, Norma relishes a chocolate-covered cherry, an anonymous gift. Unfortunately, the moment she pops the bonbon into her mouth, she dies. To complicate matters, a vital page from Norma's diary is missing. Matters go from bad to worse when Stark and his sidekick, Roscoe, find out that each one at the party had a good motive for doing away with the Queen of the Silent Scream. And then Stark discovers, accidentally by eating one of them, that the cherries weren't poisoned after all!

Stark decides enough is enough. He gathers all the suspects at a "reunion" party, complete with refreshments, balloons, and party games, during which secrets are unraveled and a clever trap is laid into which the killer eventually steps.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 M, 5 W)

DET. LARRY STARK: Veteran L.A.P.D. officer, who's seen it all; thus he speaks and acts in a monotone, unmoved by the evils of the world.

NORMA STARR: An aging star who thinks the sun rises and sets with her every whim.

JULIET: Her timid, awkward maid.

C.B. DARLING: Formidable producer of big-budget spectacles.

MAXINE COMET: A vaporous starlet rising to the top.

FREDDIE WILLIS: A chic costume designer.

EVIE ST. JOHN: A sweet, elderly lady who loves knitting and growing tomatoes.

ROMEO VALENTINE: A suave, handsome matinee idol.

E.Z. BUCKS: Norma's fast-talking agent.

ROSCOE: Stark's tactless assistant.

TIME: 1929, the sunset of the silent screen.

SETTING

DR is a desk, cluttered with papers, a phone, a coffee mug, a desk lamp, a wanted poster falling off the top into view of the audience. A mismatched desk chair completes this small view of a local police precinct. CS and SL we see the Hollywood mansion of film star Norma Starr. The set suggests opulence: a sofa and two comfortable chairs, plants, a "classic" painting, a pillar or two, and one end table with a drawer. A wrapped box of chocolate-covered cherries is behind the table.

PROPS/COSTUMES

Office papers, coffee mug; tray of canapés; champagne glasses; empty cigarette holder for Maxine; long scarf for Freddie; shawl and knitting bag for Evie; checked sports coat for E.Z.; letter opener; hat for Stark; magnifying glass for Roscoe; pad and pencil for Stark; sunglasses for C.B.; gun for Roscoe; diary; file folders; balloons, each filled with a rhyme; pin in Stark's lapel; comic book; wig, shawl, and frumpy dress for Maxine. Wrapped presents for guests to bring, including a paperback book.

SCENE 1

(AT RISE: The desk is lit. LARRY STARK enters SR, carrying papers which he tosses on desk when HE notices the audience.)

STARK: Stark's the name. Larry Stark, detective, L.A.P.D. Homicide. *(HE takes a drink of coffee, grimaces.)* Hot! Just like homicide. Yeah ... I've seen it all in this division. My trickiest case? *(HE sits on corner of desk.)* That's easy. Queen of the Silent Scream. Began the night of April 1. That's right ... April Fool's Day, 1929, at the Beverly Hills mansion of film star Norma Starr. Starr had made a career of playing damsels in distress in over a hundred silent movie cliff hangers ... hence her title, Queen of the Silent Scream!

(Lights come up on the mansion. JULIET enters nervously from SL bearing a tray of canapés. NORMA follows.)

NORMA: *(Regally.)* Set the canapés there, Juliet! *(SHE points to a spot.)*

JULIET: *(Nervously.)* Yes, Miss Starr! *(SHE obeys.)*

NORMA: *(Bitterly.)* No! No! No! The effect is all wrong! Over THERE! *(SHE points to another spot.)*

JULIET: *(More nervously.)* Yes, Miss Starr! *(SHE obeys.)*

NORMA: *(Angrily.)* Better, but not perfect! Put them over there! And be careful or you'll drop them! *(SHE points once again.)*

JULIET: *(Terrified, shaking.)* Yes, Miss Starr! *(SHE drops the tray.)*

NORMA: My canapés! Pick them up at once or you'll find yourself back picking oranges!

JULIET: *(Picking up canapés.)* Yes, Miss Starr!

STARK: You didn't say no to Norma Starr. She was one tough cookie who's clawed her way to the top ... and left scars all over Hollywood. About 8:45 guests arrived for Norma's annual birthday party she threw for herself.

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(A DOORBELL rings.)

JULIET: The guests are here for your birthday, Miss Starr.

NORMA: *(Regally.)* Then let them in!

(JULIET exits SR. Each entering guest carries a present and eventually puts it on the table.)

STARK: They were a collection of the great and the not-so-great. The young, the old; the rich, the richer. Yes, C.B. Darling was there ... *(JULIET leads DARLING on from SR. MAXINE COMET follows, brandishing her cigarette holder.)* ... the man who'd directed Norma in over twenty episodes of "Perils of Paulette."

DARLING: *(Gushing.)* Norma, darling! Still hanging in there, I see!

NORMA: We really MUST work together again, C.B., darling.

DARLING: I've got a marvelous grandmother part coming up.

NORMA: *(Contemptuously.)* Do you know any good directors? And who is this ... your granddaughter?

DARLING: Norma, this is Maxine Comet, my date. Say hello, Maxine.

MAXINE: Hello, Maxine. Glad to meet ya. *(SHE shakes NORMA'S hand vigorously.)*

NORMA: *(Repulsed.)* Are you in pictures?

DARLING: *(Incredulously.)* Are you kidding?

MAXINE: I've been in five! *(SHE holds up four fingers.)*

DARLING: Maxine is hot stuff these days, Norma.

(FREDDIE WILLIS enters from SR, tossing a long scarf about. SHE strikes poses whenever she stops moving.)

STARK: *(Glancing back.)* Freddie Willis was the famous costume designer who kept Paulette beautiful even in her perils!

FREDDIE: *(Gushing.)* Norma, you look divine!

NORMA: *(Dryly.)* I'm not dead yet.

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FREDDIE: What a wit! I love the lines, the color, the fabric!

(SHE circles NORMA, menacingly.)

NORMA: You should ... it's one of yours.

FREDDIE: *(Proudly.)* I've forgotten how good I could make you look. Even at your age!

(EVIE ST. JOHN enters from SR, a beshawled elderly lady carrying a knitting bag.)

STARK: Into the friendly gathering walked Evie St. John, Norma's oldest, dearest friend.

NORMA: *(Gushing.)* Evie, darling! How GOOD to see you.

EVIE: *(Sweetly.)* Norma, dear. You don't look a year older!

NORMA: And I don't feel a year older, either! How ARE your tomatoes doing?

EVIE: Splendidly, dear. A bumper crop. I'll bring lettuce and beans, too, when I harvest.

NORMA: *(Sarcastically.)* Just like Mama. But the only greens I want are bankable!

(Quiet conversations ensue among the characters. ROMEO VALENTINE enters SR, a dashing be-suited actor with slicked back hair.)

STARK: The entrance of Romeo Valentine brought conversation to a halt. *(Immediate silence as ALL take HIM in.)* Valentine was THE matinee idol, the perfect leading man who'd stolen hearts from viewers throughout the country.

NORMA: *(Giggly, a schoolgirl.)* Well, Mr. Valentine ... I'm SOOOOOOOO glad you could make it to my little soiree!

ROMEO: *(Suavely.)* And I am so glad we finally meet in person, Miss Starr! *(HE kisses HER hand.)* I am one of your biggest fans. I've seen every picture you've ever made.

NORMA: *(Breathlessly.)* Did anyone ever tell you you're VERY charming? Have you really seen EVERY picture?

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