

A Jury of Her Peers

a drama in one act by

Burton Bumgarner

adapted from the short story by Susan Glaspell

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STORY OF THE PLAY

A farmer has been found dead and his wife, Minnie, is the prime suspect. The sheriff, a deputy and other men meet at the lonely farmhouse to go over the evidence while two wives gather some clothes and necessities for Minnie, who is in jail. Two neighbor ladies, the Gains sisters, arrive to see what they can learn about the disturbing events of the previous day.

As the men go about the business of investigation, the women make a remarkable discovery: the motive for the crime. Set in 1917, three years before women had the right to vote or serve on juries, the women become Minnie's jury.

The story, which features four powerful female roles, is a fascinating work of moral and social conscience, as well as an intriguing murder mystery.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

4 m, 4 w

HENDERSON: The county attorney.

SHERIFF: The local sheriff.

EDNA: Spouse of the sheriff.

MR. HARRIS: A farmer.

MARTHA HARRIS: Spouse of Mr. Harris.

WILLA GAINS: Lives on a nearby farm.

RUTH GAINS: Willa's sister.

DEPUTY: Local young man.

SETTING

The front parlor of the prairie farm house of Mr. and Mrs. Wright, a childless couple who lived in an isolated environment. Furnishings are sparse and simple. Two rocking chairs, an old-fashioned sofa, tables with gas lamps or lanterns and a dining room table and chairs are part of the set. Behind the sofa, unseen or barely seen by the audience, is a birdcage. Beside one of the rocking chairs is a sewing basket and a quilt upon which Mrs. Wright had been working. A stove or fireplace is upstage, as well as a doorway to the kitchen (left) and stairs or the hint of stairs going to the bedroom (right). The front door is left. During the blackout sounds of roaring wind may be heard.

PROPS

Notebook, pencil, thread, scraps of fabric, quilt, jar of preserves, wood, sewing basket, silk, small dead bird, and folded clothing.

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(AT RISE: The DEPUTY is kneeling by the stove. HENDERSON, the County Attorney, ENTERS from the steps. He carries a notebook in which he makes entries. Both men wear winter coats, hats, scarves. The Deputy stands. Henderson crosses to the rocking chair with the quilt.)

DEPUTY: The fire's going. The place should warm up pretty quick now.

HENDERSON: Has anything been moved since yesterday?

DEPUTY: Don't know.

HENDERSON: Is this the chair?

DEPUTY: Don't know. You'll have to ask the Sheriff.

HENDERSON: The Sheriff isn't here so I'm asking you.

DEPUTY: Don't know.

HENDERSON: Which bedroom?

DEPUTY: Which bedroom?

HENDERSON: Did they find Mr. Wright in the front bedroom or the rear bedroom?

DEPUTY: Don't know.

HENDERSON: You don't know?

DEPUTY: No, I don't.

HENDERSON: You're not a whole lot of help. Weren't you up here yesterday?

DEPUTY: Nope.

HENDERSON: Why not? Aren't you employed by the county as a deputy?

DEPUTY: I was sick yesterday.

HENDERSON: Well, you look fine today.

DEPUTY: I am fine today.

HENDERSON: So, where is the Sheriff?

DEPUTY: On his way, I suppose.

HENDERSON: *(Frustrated.)* On his way you suppose?

DEPUTY: He sent me up here to start a fire so you fellows wouldn't get so cold when you're working.

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HENDERSON: Tell me honestly. Did you move or touch anything since you've been here?

DEPUTY: I went out to the woodpile and touched some wood.

HENDERSON: I mean in the house!

DEPUTY: I touched the matchbox.

HENDERSON: How long have you been here?

DEPUTY: About five minutes before you got here.

HENDERSON: *(Making notes.)* Don't touch anything.

DEPUTY: Okay. *(MR. HARRIS and his wife MARTHA, SHERIFF PETERS and his wife ELIZABETH ENTER. They wear winter coats, scarves and gloves. They look around with unease.)* Sheriff's here.

HENDERSON: *(Not pleased.)* Sheriff. Who are these people?

SHERIFF: This is Mr. Harris and his wife, Martha. And this is my wife, Edna. Ladies, this is Mr. Henderson, the County Attorney. *(MARTHA and EDNA politely nod.)*

HENDERSON: What on earth would possess you to bring women to an investigation scene?

SHERIFF: Well, Mrs. Wright needs some things. You know. Women's things. Fresh clothes and *(Searching for a word.)* ... under things. And I don't know nothing about that, so I thought the ladies could help out.

HENDERSON: No one is to touch anything until I finish! Is that clear? *(ALL nod and freeze. HENDERSON writes for a count, then looks up.)* Well? What are you doing?

SHERIFF: Waiting for you to finish. *(HENDERSON closes his notebook.)*

HENDERSON: All right. Mr. Harris. Are things just as you left them yesterday?

HARRIS: *(Looking around.)* It's just the same.

HENDERSON: *(To SHERIFF.)* Somebody should have stayed here.

SHERIFF: I had my hands full yesterday. One Deputy was home sick and the others were out at the Olsen farm. There was a disturbance out there.

DEPUTY: Thad Olsen again?

SHERIFF: None other. Gets drunk and he gets mean.

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HENDERSON: So, how long did it take you to get here?

SHERIFF: Well, we had to haul Thad Olsen in to jail, and that took four of us. *(Looks at DEPUTY.)* Could have used more help. *(DEPUTY bows his head.)*

DEPUTY: I'll go fetch some more wood. *(DEPUTY EXITS.)*

SHERIFF: Mr. Harris was waiting in my office when I got there. It's about two o'clock.

HENDERSON: *(To HARRIS.)* What time did you leave this house, Mr. Harris?

HARRIS: Around nine in the morning. *(HENDERSON shakes his head in disgust.)*

HENDERSON: *(To SHERIFF.)* What time did you arrive here?

SHERIFF: About thirty minutes later.

HENDERSON: So the crime scene was unprotected for five hours. *(Writes in HIS notebook.)* Unbelievable.

SHERIFF: There was no one out here except Mrs. Wright.

HENDERSON: How do you know?

SHERIFF: In weather like this folks keep to themselves.

HENDERSON: Who are the nearest neighbors?

SHERIFF: The only neighbors are the Lawrences and the Gains sisters. You passed their houses when you came out here.

HENDERSON: Before we move things about, I want to know exactly what you saw when you came here yesterday morning. *(HENDERSON takes notes.)*

HARRIS: Well, sir. Harry and I had started to town with a load of potatoes.

HENDERSON: Harry?

SHERIFF: He's their oldest boy.

HENDERSON: Continue.

HARRIS: We had just come along this road and as we got in sight of the house I says to Harry, I'm gonna see if I can't get John Wright to take a telephone. You see, unless I can get somebody to go in with me they won't come out this branch road except for a price I can't pay. I'd spoke to Wright about it once before, but he put me off. Said folks talked too much anyway and all he wanted was peace and quiet.

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