

DEAD MEN DON'T NEED DRESS REHEARSALS

By William D. Nutt

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Everyone seemed to hate Derek Moore, so no one is surprised when the smooth-talking actor is found dead in the middle of a dress rehearsal. Archie Lewis, a well-intentioned but goofy detective who happens to be in the theater, offers to solve the case, but things turn out to be more complicated than he anticipates.

Why does the female stagehand, Ed, talk only in lines from classical literature and popular songs? Why does the laconic Francis keep covering for the unsmiling Jessica? Is there more to naive Terri than devotion to Derek? Do Maria's wisecracks cover a deeper secret? Is the director, Susan, lying to cover someone else's guilt - or her own?

This interactive comedy-mystery is sure to keep playgoers on their toes -- to say nothing of the actors, who must undergo grilling by the audience!

CAST OF CHARACTERS (3 m, 5 w)

JESSICA GOOD: Actress.

FRANCIS EAGLEBURGER: Actor.

MARIA HERBERT: Actress.

TERRI WITHERSPOON: Young, inexperienced actress.

SUSAN FINE: Director.

ED: Stagehand. She speaks only in lines from plays, literature and songs, but she delivers them in a very natural manner. (*See end of script for references.*)

DEREK MOORE: A charming, suave, and thoroughly annoying actor.

ARCHIE LEWIS: Detective.

TIME: Current day.

SETTING: A small community theatre.

SETTING

This is supposed to be a dress rehearsal, so the set has an unfinished look. There should be a cassette tape recorder somewhere easily accessible. There should also be a table (on which the prop gun can later be placed) and in Act II, six chairs.

PROPS

DEREK: Gun, trench coat, stage blood.

TERRI: Maid uniform.

MARIA: Fancy gown, gray wig, notepad, note.

FRANCIS: Cowboy outfit.

JESSICA: Trench coat, hat, gun.

ARCHIE: Wallet with license, notepad and pen.

SUSAN: Key.

ED: Script.

STAGE: Cassette tape of Charlie Haden Quartet West's
"Always Say Good-bye."

ACT I

(In the darkness, we hear a GUNSHOT. LIGHTS up. We are watching the conclusion of a play-within-a-play. DEREK lies face down CS, one arm outstretched with a gun near it. Around him are: TERRI, dressed in a maid's uniform; MARIA, in a fancy dress or gown and also maybe a gray wig; FRANCIS, who is dressed as a cowboy; and JESSICA, who wears a trench coat and a hat and who holds a gun. Ages are relatively unimportant, although Terri should be the youngest of the group. The delivery of the first few lines should be somewhat awkward and artificial — these are not the greatest actors, and they don't have their lines completely down yet. The effect of the voices, along with the different costumes, should be absurd.)

JESSICA: *(Grim, matter-of-fact, like a female Jack Webb.)*
And that will teach you to pull a gun on an armed woman,
you cad.

FRANCIS: *(Very broad western accent.)* Well, Ah'll be horn-
swaggled! It was that sidewinder who killed that pore gurl!
Ah told ya!

MARIA: *(Affected, upper-class British.)* Yes, Mr. Slim. You
are certainly right.

TERRI: *(Phony-sounding French accent.)* Mon Dieu! Sacre
bleu! *(SHE now loses the accent as she realizes that she
has come in too soon.)* Oh, merde! I stepped on your line
again, Jessica. I'm sorry.

JESSICA: *(In HER normal voice, but still unsmiling.)* It's all
right, Terri. Everyone can make mistakes. *(SHE makes it
clear, though, that some people have exceeded their
allotment of mistakes.)*

*(From this point on, EVERYONE speaks in a normal voice.
From offstage or from the audience, we hear SUSAN. She is
efficient and generally patient, although her limits are being
stretched.)*

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SUSAN: Terri, I thought you had that scene down. Your line comes after Jessica's line about the price of justice.

TERRI: I know, Susan. I'm sorry. *(To the CAST.)* Sorry, really. *(To the audience.)* Sorry, really. We appreciate your patience.

SUSAN: *(Coming on stage.)* Terri, I know you're new to the theater, but you've got to break the habit of talking to the audience. It may work for Pirandello, but not a mystery. *(To the audience.)* Don't you agree?

MARIA: I just think we're getting a little punchy, Susan. Do you think it was such a good idea having an audience for a dress rehearsal?

SUSAN: It seemed like a good idea a week ago, Maria. Now, well...

(At this point, DEREK, on the floor, raises his hand.)

DEREK: Permission for the dead to speak?

(DEREK stands. He is the best actor on the stage, because he's always acting. He carries a trench coat, but does not wear it.)

SUSAN: Yes, Derek, you don't need to raise your hand. This isn't a classroom.

DEREK: Well, I'm not quite so sure of that, given the caliber of the script we're working with, but I'll give you the benefit of the doubt. I just think it might be a good idea if we took a few minutes break, reset the last scene to my entrance, and then went through, full-steam, to the end. *(To TERRI, patronizing.)* You can do that, can't you, Terri?

TERRI: *(Who is currently smitten with DEREK.)* Oh, yes.

DEREK: *(To SUSAN.)* There.

SUSAN: Your masterful touch at work again, Derek. What would I do without you? *(To EVERYONE.)* All right, take five. *(Calls to offstage.)* Ed!

(Enter ED. Ed should be older than the other women.)

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SUSAN: Ed, we're going to take the scene from page 64 again, all right?

ED: "One can never step into the same river twice."

SUSAN: *(Slight laugh.)* That may be, but we're going to try one more time, and that should be it. I'll take care of the lights.

ED: "Go do that voodoo that you do so well." *(SHE picks up the gun on the floor and goes to DEREK.)*

DEREK: *(Talking to a rapt TERRI.)* No, no, no my dear, it really isn't your fault. If the script were good, it would have its own rhythms, its own song. Remembering the lines would come quite easily. There are no bad actors, only badly written parts, as the poet once said. *(Taking the gun from ED and flashing a smile.)* Why, thank you ever so much, my dear. *(HE places the gun in a pocket in his trench coat.)*

ED: *(Deadly serious.)* "You've got a lot of nerve to say you are my friend."

(While this is being played, JESSICA and MARIA are talking in the background and FRANCIS is eyeing DEREK coldly. TERRI goes off, ED leaves to straighten a prop, and Francis goes up to Derek.)

FRANCIS: You can't avoid me forever, you know.

DEREK: Why, Francis! You know, just the other day I was thinking to myself, "Golly, how long can't I avoid Francis?" And now you've told me: "Forever." *(Pats HIM on shoulder.)* Thanks ever so much for enlightening me.

FRANCIS: You can act as clever as you want, but you know what I mean. Why, I've got half a mind - -

DEREK: Stop! To say anything more would spoil a perfect line.

FRANCIS: You ask me, you should be the one killed in this play.

(FRANCIS goes off and is joined by JESSICA.)

End of Freeview

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