

# The Act of Murder

*By Billy St. John*

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### SET DESIGN

In the theatre lobby there are fake play posters presenting Linda Parker in "Kisses to Die For." Audience members are also given programs with her pictures on the cover. When they turn the program over, they will discover the program cover for "The Act of Murder."

In the theatre, the main curtain is open and the stage lights are up, as well as the house lights. A drawing room set is on the stage. It is not as wide as the width of the stage so that black return flats can be seen DR and DL when the curtain is opened fully. These flats are either lashed to the main set or hinged with removable hinge pins so that the flats can be removed to reveal portions of the backstage areas. Three folding chairs are behind the DR return. A fireplace is centered in the SR wall; a bench sits before it. A door is in the DR corner of the room, DS of the fireplace. A door (*or set of double doors.*) is centered in the US wall. Hallway backing is revealed when the door is opened. A floor - to - ceiling bookcase is centered in the UR wall and another one is in the UL wall. The bookcases are on wheels, and are eventually moved aside to reveal the sound effects table behind the UL wall and the prop person's table behind the UR wall. A set of straight backed chairs is placed on either side of the center door between the door and the bookcases. Centered in the L wall is a set of French doors which open out onto a patio with garden backing. When the DL return flat is removed, the stage manager's podium is revealed. CS is a sofa which has a long, narrow table behind it. DS of the sofa and to either side of it sits a pair of low backed chairs. A desk and chair is in front of the French windows facing into the room.

### **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*(See Production Notes about role of Linda Parker.)*

**LT. KENNETH PARIS:** A police detective; intelligent; has seen the seamy side of life, but is still capable of compassion and humor.

**GILBERT SIMPSON:** A flamboyant theatre director, early 40s.

**JERRY** *(Or JERI.)* **KIRKPATRICK:** A young, hard - working police officer, observant, quiet. Admires LT. Paris. May be played by female if necessary.

**SHEILA NICHOLS:** The star's understudy, late 30s, an amateur who still dreams of becoming a star. Wears a gorgeous evening gown with straps that cross at her back.

**HARRY SHEFFIELD:** A handsome leading man, early 40s, who plays Jeffrey, Linda's lover, in "Kisses." Wears a tuxedo. Was once engaged to marry Linda.

**THOMAS PORTER:** A seasoned character actor, 50s, plays Chester Cunningham, Linda's husband, in "Kisses." Wears a tuxedo, has a large, bushy moustache. Once lost a small fortune when investing in a play for Linda Parker.

**BITSY DEAN:** Early 20s a supporting actress who plays Felicity, the maid, in "Kisses." Wears a skimpy French maid's outfit and petite maid's cap. Emulates her favorite actress, the late Marilyn Monroe, with frothy blonde hair - do and little girl voice. Will never make it big because she's a bad actress.

**B.J. ELLINGTON:** Stage manger, late teens, male or female.

**SARAH WITHERSPOON:** The prop mistress, 30s, is in love with Gilbert Simpson.

**CARRIE CARTER:** The sound effects person, in love with Harry Sheffield. Early 30s.

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ACT I

LT. PARIS: *(Enters through center doors.)* Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to have to tell you that tonight's performance has been cancelled. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to publicize the cancellation and save you a trip to the theatre, but the star of the play — Linda Parker — cannot go on; Linda Parker is dead. She was murdered in this theatre just a few hours ago.

*(SIMPSON rushes in DR followed by KIRKPATRICK.)*

GILBERT: LT. Paris, I insist you let "Kisses to Die For" be performed! Haven't you heard that "the show must go on"? There are critics out there!

JERRY: I'm sorry, LT. Paris. I tried to stop him.

LT. PARIS: That's all right, Officer Kirkpatrick.

GILBERT: *(Pointing to the audience.)* Those people came here expecting to see a play — a world premiere! Producers and potential backers have flown here from New York. You can't close us down!

LT. PARIS: How do you expect to present "Kisses to Die For" when your leading lady has been murdered?

GILBERT: Oh, I called her understudy, Sheila Nichols, when we realized Linda was dead. *(Calls offs DR.)*  
Sheila!

LT. PARIS: You can't -

*(SHEILA sticks her head out from the wings DR.)*

SHELIA: You called me, Gilbert?

GILBERT: Yes, Sheila. See LT. Paris —

LT. PARIS: Mr. Gilbert, you are definitely not going to perform the play tonight. Jerry, bring all the other members of the company onto the stage.

JERRY: Certainly, LT. Paris. *(HE exits DR.)*

GILBERT: What ... ?

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LT. PARIS: *(To the audience.)* Ladies and gentlemen, I know this might seem a little out of the ordinary, but if you would be willing to help me, I'd like you to stay. Oh, my name is Kenneth Paris and I'm a police detective. I've been assigned to investigate the murder of Linda Parker. My assistant, Officer Jerry Kirkpatrick, and I have questioned the people who were in the theatre earlier today when Ms. Parker was given a lethal dose of poison. Now we need to recreate some of the events that occurred a few hours ago. Perhaps you could jot down some notes on your program as I interrogate the suspects, then later you can question them yourself.

There are a few people in the company that we can assume are not involved in the murder since they weren't at the theatre when Linda Parker was killed. Sheila Nichols here, Ms. Parker's understudy, was called in after the murder, as you've heard. Also the box office personnel and the light crew, so we'll leave them off our suspect list — for the time being, anyway. *(To GILBERT.)* I'd like to recreate the scene as it was then. Could we turn the house lights out, please?

GILBERT: *(Yelling to the light booth.)* Kill the house!  
*(The house LIGHTS go out.)*

SHEILA: *(To GILBERT.)* Couldn't you just say "turn out the lights"?

GILBERT: Oh, put it in park, Sheila.

*(Ad - libs are heard as JERRY escorts HARRY, THOMAS BITSY, B.J., SARAH, and CARRIE through center door. THOMAS says, referring to the audience, "What are they still doing here? I thought the policeman sent them home.")*

LT. PARIS: *(To the company.)* I asked the audience to stay. I want you to tell your stories again in front of those people out there; hopefully, they can help me discover which of you murdered Linda Parker.

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*(There is a burst of protests from the COMPANY.)*

LT. PARIS: *(Continued.)* If you didn't kill Ms. Parker, then you have no reason to fear having the audience listen to your alibis. Now will you all find places to sit?

*(BITSY takes the chair DR of the sofa; HARRY & SHEILA take the sofa; THOMAS takes the chair DL of the sofa; GILBERT takes the desk chair; B.J. takes the fireplace bench; SARAH takes the chair to the R. of the UC door; and CARRIE takes the chair to the L of the UC door. JERRY gets a folding chair from the DR wings and sits in DR corner.)*

LT. PARIS: These people were in the theatre from about two o'clock this afternoon until now, except for Ms. Nichols, of course. *(Moves to DLC, gets ready to take notes.)* This is the director of "Kisses to Die For," Gilbert Simpson. He also wrote the play.

GILBERT: *(To audience.)* I am a writer and director, not a murderer. I helped Linda get her start right here on this stage twenty years ago. And no one was happier than I was when she starred in the "Seagull Bay" series on TV. I was ecstatic when Linda agreed to be in my play. *(To PARIS.)* She's the one who got the New York investors to fly in for tonight's performance. If they had liked her in my play — and they would have! — we could have gone to Broadway. Linda could have been my stepping stone to fame and fortune — why would I want her dead?

HARRY: *(To GILBERT.)* Of course, if Linda had done what she threatened to do, you'd be a prime suspect. She wasn't going to, was she, Gilbert?

LT. PARIS: What do you mean, Mr. Sheffield?

HARRY: We are all aware that Linda threatened to walk out on the show. Knowing her, I don't doubt she could have gone right out the door at eight o'clock and leave Gilbert to make some excuse to the audience and send Sheila on in her place.

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