

Murder Backstage



A Whodunnit

Chris McDermott

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Dramatis Personae

Alex Mitchel: The Director and author of the play being rehearsed, “The Diary of an Urban Tree Dweller”. He takes his work very seriously. He is living with Heather Ronson, legally still the wife of Brian Ronson. Alex is self-centred and domineering.

Heather Ronson: Alex’s girlfriend and the wife of Brian Ronson. She is tired of Alex’s self-centred pretension, but is somehow still under his spell. Husband Brian still holds out a candle for her; she does not discourage this interest because, despite her lack of reciprocity, she finds the interest flattering

Brian Ronson: A dependable, if boring, soul. He is Heather’s husband, although they have been separated for a number of years. His current partner is Jo Mablethorpe, and despite the fact that they have been together for eighteen months, they still live separately. Brian hankers after his wife. He is physically smaller than Rodrigo.

Sarah Ronson: Daughter of Brian and Heather. According to her, Alex showed an unreciprocated interest in her when she was a younger woman; Alex is in denial about this. She had previously admired Alex, but his unsolicited interest in her brought her to the realisation of Alex’s self-centredness. She now holds Alex in something like contempt. Sarah does not like the fact that her mother is living with Alex.

Jo Mablethorpe: She is Brian’s girlfriend. Jo is an anxious character whose lack of self-confidence leads her to doubt her relationship with Brian, her acting abilities and almost every aspect of her life. She is suspicious that the Committee of the West Griddlington Amateur Dramatic Society chose Alex’s script over hers because of his clout with the committee.

Rodrigo Castello: Spanish teacher who hails from Oviedo in northern Spain. Constantly criticised by Alex, he earns a living through some part-time Spanish teaching and various menial jobs. He is hoping to pass his English examinations so that he has a greater chance of obtaining employment as a full-time English teacher. Physically bigger than Brian. N.B. Rodrigo is meant to speak in a pseudo-Spanish accent (comical). An attempt has been made to represent this in the script.

The play is set backstage at the West Griddlington Amateur Dramatic Society’s theatre. The play opens when rehearsals of Alex Mitchel’s new creation, “The Diary of an Urban Tree Dweller - a Modern Robin Hood” are in full flood.

MURDER BACKSTAGE

ACT ONE

SIX CHARACTERS WALK TO THEIR POSITIONS ON THE STAGE. EACH STANDS READY TO BE DIRECTED BY ALEX. ALEX IS BOTH THE DIRECTOR AND AUTHOR OF THE PLAY BEING REHEARSED, 'DIARY OF AN URBAN TREE DWELLER - A MODERN-DAY ROBIN HOOD'. ALEX IS CLEARLY NOT PLEASED WITH THE CAST.

Alex: Metaphor, darlings, metaphor. You must remember that your interpretation should reflect an understanding that modern society is raping the world, and therefore the creatures who live upon it.

Heather: Oh, for God's sake Alex, don't be so pompous. You know that no one in the audience at the West Griddlington Amateur Dramatic Society gives a stuff for your pseudo interpretations of your second-rate scripts. You can't even manage to script the minutiae of your own life, so how you propose to save the planet is beyond the comprehension of any sane person.

Sarah: Come on you two. Give us a break. Do we have to have this performance every time you get together in public? Alex, stop being so pretentious; Mummy, leave him alone.

Jo: If we had adopted my script in the first place, we never would have had this problem. It was only the old boys' network which gave you the deciding vote on the committee, and if you ask me,.....

Brian: Children, children, please can we get back to the matter in hand. If I remember correctly, my character, the alternative tree surgeon, Alistair Green, is about to defend the protesters, played by you Rodrigo as 'Swampy' Nolan, you Heather as 'Maid Marion' and Sarah as 'Forest Elf' from the road construction company fronted by you Alex as the Big Boss, Sir Douglas Nimby, and Jo as the construction site-manager, Emily Stour. Alex, weren't you about to insist that an injunction would be taken out if the protesters were determined to continue?

Alex: Thank you Brian. What a pity you can't be so assertive in the rest of your life.
(Declaiming) *'You must know that to go against our authority would lead to possible imprisonment.'*

Sarah: *You rapist. Do you not realise what you are doing to our planet? Gaia will surely die.*

Rodrigo: *And then where will the birds live? Have compassion for our feathered friends.*
(With passion). *You are horrible!* **(The word 'horrible' is said as it would be in Spanish.)**

Alex: For goodness sake, Rodrigo, how many years have you been living in this country? It's 'horrible', not 'horrible.' **(Said in the Spanish way.)**

Sarah: (Half to herself) Whatever the language, the sentiment is still the same. You are horrible Alex. We all know that. You're attacking the forest now, just as you tried to impose yourself upon me, if you get my meaning, all those years ago!

Heather: Darling be quiet! Just let him get on with it. You know what he's like.

Brian: *Yes, let my people go free, to return to nature. To live among the trees of the forest!*

Jo: *But the law is the law. I must insist on supporting Sir Douglas over here (Points dramatically to Nimby i.e. Alex) in our attempt to relieve the congestion in the surrounding villages.*

Heather: So what's new, Jo? You support Dear Alex every time we have a minor tiff. Why don't you concentrate on putting your relationship in order? Or are you so bored with Brian that you have to seek your thrills vicariously, in other people's disputes?

Alex: Right, that's it! Any more of this and I'm going home! I knew that choosing a cast like this would lead to problems.

Rodrigo: **(Still concerned with the play, oblivious to what has just gone before)** *I must honour these bushes (Looks at Marion i.e. Heather and Elf i.e. Sarah). It is part of God's sacred creation. I will worship at the temple of Gaia. (Closes eyes as if in a trance) Om.*

Brian: *And I will give the bush an injection of virility. Let me free with the syringe! I anoint you a child of the planet (Green i.e. Brian symbolically holds the syringe above Elf i.e. Sarah)*

Sarah: *Forest Elf says 'Save Our Bushes!'*

Heather: *Maid Marion says 'Save Our Bushes!'*

Sarah and Marion hold hands.

Sarah and Heather: *Save Our Bushes!!*

Alex: That's good. Now we're really getting into the sense of the piece. Rather good, if I say so myself. It's about time the denizens of West Griddlington understood that the saving of the planet is an issue for them as well as the rest of us.

Jo: Alex, I'm not sure about the delivery of my next line, *'Forget about saving the planet. You'll make even greater savings if you let us build our road, thereby cutting five miles off the journey between Raston and Lower Cockham.'* Is it meant to be some kind of weak joke?

Alex: Look Jo, why don't you take a leaf out of your boyfriend's book? How many times do I have to say this? This is a serious work, meant to raise the consciousness of the local community. Your line merely confirms the lack of sensitivity of the road construction company.

Jo: (With great intensity): *'You'll make even greater savings if you let us build our road.....'*

Jo is interrupted by the telephone ringing.

Brian: Do you want me to get it?

Sarah: (With sarcasm) Go on Daddy, it's probably someone from the first night audience wanting to know how to know if re-cycling is hyphenated or one word.

Brian picks up the receiver.

Brian: Hello? I beg your pardon. Just a minute please. Rodrigo, it's for you.

Rodrigo comes to the telephone to take the call.

Rodrigo: Hello.....yes.....oh, good.....Very good. So that is the result of the final examination. It is as we had hoped. Thank you for your trouble. Good night.

Heather: So you passed then Rodrigo. Congratulations! I knew that you couldn't fail your English exams again. May I be the first.....

Rodrigo looks slightly abashed and unsure how to respond.

Alex: (Becoming even more impatient) Let's try to push on towards the end. Brian, why haven't you got your syringe?

Brian: Not wishing to be difficult Alex, but aren't you the keeper of the props?

Alex: What? Yes, of course. I'll go and have a look in the props room. Is there anyone else who needs anything? No, all right. Take a break everyone, I'll be back in two minutes.

Sarah: Can I make a suggestion?

Alex: If you must.

Sarah: I'm sure the script is wonderful, and will have a great effect on raising awareness among the audience. However, don't you think we should make some attempt to appeal to a wider audience?

Alex: Go on.

Sarah: Well, don't you think the play would be more attractive to younger people if it contained more action?

Alex: Such as?

Sarah: Well, I think there should be a greater element of violence. **(Sarcastically)** You know, guns and threats. Real confrontation. I think someone should die. So that the name 'eco-warrior' means what it says.

Heather: Good idea darling. Could I be the one to shoot you Alex? You know, the triumph of good over evil.

Jo: Don't be selfish now Sarah. Don't you think we'd all like the chance?

Sarah: Let's draw lots, then.

Brian: No, let's be more original than that. Rodrigo. Think of a date.

Rodrigo: A dathe. Let me see.....1492.

Brian: No Rodrigo. A date in the year.

Rodrigo: Ah Si! 21st August. My mother's birthday (**Thinks of her with affection**).

Brian: Right, whose birthday is nearest to that date?

Jo: Mine's in early September.

Sarah: Mine's in October.

Heather: I'm a Christmas Child.

Rodrigo: I am born in lathe January.

Brian: And I was born in the middle of March. So it looks as though it must be you, Jo. You're the nearest.

They all laugh.

Brian: It's a good thing for you we're not serious Alex.

Alex: Hold on a minute. Many a true word said in jest, and all that. I think Sarah may have something, you know. (**Pauses and reflects, surprising the others and himself**). Why not? Yes, we'll do it. We'll have a shooting on stage. As long as I am in total charge of the script, mind. (**Pauses again**) Yes, why not? I can see myself reaching out to the young, crossing the generation gap where others have failed. The Jim Morrisson of his generation. (**Moves offstage left with a spring in his step**). Won't take much more than it takes to fire two rounds of ammunition from a Colt 45.

Alex leaves, Stage Right.

Brian: Coffee anyone?

Sarah: You're joking. When Alex says take a break, he means you can have as much time as he needs to do what he needs to do. He'll be back in a minute, and he'll expect us to be back rehearsing.

Heather: Come on Sarah. I know he's tiresome at times, but there are reasons you know.

Sarah: Which are? Since when have you been Alex's Great Defender? I don't know how you put up with him.

Brian: (**Showing unusual interest**) Where did Alex get the syringe from anyway?

Heather: The NHS apparently. One of Rodrigo's friends can lay his hands on them without too much difficulty.

Jo: All part of the foreign legion of workers who keep the system going.

Heather: We could do with our own dedicated branch at home. Alex has been so tetchy lately, you know. I sometimes wonder why I tolerate him consid.....

Brian: Well Heather it was your choice. I don't remember you consulting me when you suddenly disappeared to.....

Jo: (In anger) Brian you're with me now! You and Heather have been separated for at least two years. So I'd appreciate it if you didn't play up to your wife in such a clearly provocative manner.

Brian: I'm sorry dear. I didn't mean to cause offence, you know that.

Heather: I wouldn't worry too much Jo. The chances of me wanting Brian back are not great. Alex may be egocentric, but at least he's interesting (**Looking at Brian**). Is Brian still obsessed by Elizabethan drama? Not to mention (**Said with some sarcasm**) fine wines?

Sarah: Daddy, why don't you stand up for yourself? Instead of letting everyone talk about you as if you weren't here.

Rodrigo: But you are very polite English gentleman Brian. No like Alex. He is full of the abuse for me. I hate him with all my hearth.

Heather: You would not say that if you if you were a woman Rodrigo. For women Alex has a certain charm, and a wandering eye. (**With great seriousness**) I sometimes worry that my time with him is near its end.

Jo: Don't be so melodramatic darling! You at least have someone else who's waiting in the wings....someone too frightened to make a move now lest he should offend. (**Looks at Brian**). Isn't that right dearest?

Just as Brian is about to reply, in bounds Alex, with syringe and two bags in hand.

Alex: All is well! Guns and syringe as promised.

Sarah: And where are the guns?

Alex: In my hand.

Sarah: (Looking at bags) Oh I see. Well, open the bags then.

Alex: Most certainly not.

Sarah: But what's the point of getting the props if you're not going to allow anyone to see them?

Alex: Oh Sarah, how young you are. Have you never heard of the West Griddlington Superstition?

Sarah: Enlighten me.

Alex: If a firearm is taken out of its bag during rehearsal, then someone in the cast will perish.

All: (in mock horror) Oh no!

Alex: You may laugh, but that's the belief, and I don't intend to be the first director to put it to the test. Now let's do some more rehearsing before it's time for us all to go home. Rodrigo?

Rodrigo: (Declaiming) *I would rather die than leave the trees to the bullerdosers! I am here to save the Earth! Earth, you are my friend!* **(Collapses to kiss the ground).**

Sarah: (Following suit) *And I will follow for Gaia.*

Heather: (Following Elf i.e. Sarah) *And I.*

Rodrigo now comes to his knees with hands raised in the air in triumph.

Rodrigo: *For Gaia!*

All leave the stage except for Alex who speaks to the audience.