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Customer Taster

Dead as a Shed

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Dead as a Shed

Organiser's Overview

Structure

The murder mystery pack contains:

- The Organiser's Overview [*Excerpt here*]
- The Script [*Excerpt here*]
- Prediction Sheets, with questions for the audience to answer
- A version of the Prediction Sheet with example correct answers

Organiser's Overview

The document contains guidance on the following:

- Essential requirements for presenting *Dead as a Shed*
- Overview of the mystery's format
- Characters and casting
- The master of ceremonies' role
- Staging – props, scenery, costumes, curtains, sound and lighting
- Using the Prediction Sheets
- Holding an interactive questioning session
- Information for the cast to know when they are questioned

Essential Requirements for Presenting *Dead as a Shed*

You will need:

- A venue with a performance area that can accommodate seven chairs, plus a seating area beyond for an audience
- Seven people to take acting roles, with a chair for each one
- One further participant to act as master of ceremonies
- Printed copies of the prediction sheet and pens to distribute to the audience
- A person to mark the prediction sheets

Overview of Format

The mystery is presented to an audience in the form of a scripted play, requiring seven actors. The first of its two acts is around fifty minutes in length. The second act, in which the answers are revealed to the audience, is around twenty minutes in length.

Grouping the audience into teams based around cabaret-style seating is recommended. During an interval, in which refreshments might be served or made available, a copy of the prediction sheet is to be distributed to each team for them to fill out and hand back before Act 2 is presented.

The Characters

There are – as scripted – three male characters and four female. The males are: **Ted Cooper**, the shed installer, **Trevor Bishop**, the vicar, and **Lysander Bell**, the local historian. Each is envisaged as being of middling years, but across the set they could be played by actors covering multiple generations.

The females comprise the two investigators, **DS Stephanie Nook** and **Superintendent Vicky Blanchard**, along with **Abigail Pounder** who is the parish clerk, and **Kimberley Strut**, who is Ted's solicitor. There is, again, some flexibility on age but Kimberley is intimated to be a novice, while the high-ranking Blanchard would be more believable played by an older actor.

Some scope exists to gender-swap characters. Where finding it easier to use more male actors, both detectives could be presented as male by merely changing their first names and using 'Sir' instead of 'Ma'am' wherever this appears. A male equivalent of Abigail might also work with minimal changes

to the script. Where finding it easier to use female actors, both Trevor and Lysander could be swapped to female with only minor changes to the script and character dynamics.

The character of Ted, the shed installer, needs to rhyme with ‘shed’, has a history of pub brawls and has a sexist, condescending attitude to Kimberley. Accordingly, this pair is best cast as written.

Master of Ceremonies

The master of ceremonies advises the audience to pay close attention to the first act, in order to complete the prediction sheet that will then be issued to them. The master of ceremonies is also responsible for:

- Greeting the audience, explaining the format, and giving any venue-specific safety notices
- Distributing the prediction sheets and pens during the interval
- Issuing any supplementary, production-specific instructions about how to complete the prediction sheets and when to submit them
- Facilitating an (optional) interactive question session during the interval
- Arranging for the completed sheets to be gathered in and marked
- Announcing the winning team/teams and (optionally) presenting them with a token prize

Staging – Props, Scenery, Costumes, Curtains, Sound and Lighting

The piece is designed to be ultra-simple to stage, such that a production could be put on with minimal prior access to a venue, or could even move between different venues. It requires no scenery or props, nor any specialist theatrical equipment or infrastructure. It is not essential for the performance space to be elevated, nor to have wings, stage exits or curtain, for example.

The seven participants each sit at a chair and represent their character’s presence in an on-screen meeting. Accordingly, a blank backdrop is suitable and no other stage dressing is required. The actors remain seated in the performance area throughout. If seated at desks, localised lights or signs mounted therefrom could be employed to indicate when the characters are active on the call. Alternatively, actors could simply turn away from the audience when they are not ‘on’.

Little is required by way of costumes, other than the traditional parson’s dog-collar for Trevor and a bloodied bandage around Blanchard’s head. Being a detective, it would be suitable for Nook to wear professional attire, rather than uniform. If Blanchard were similarly lacking in police-style insignia, this should not cause confusion for the audience; her role is explained within the dialogue.

While familiarity with the script is important for the cast, this would be a suitable production – if preferred – in which to use actors who are more comfortable when performing with a script in front of them. They could hold papers, for example, or have digital devices in hand or mounted on their desk, as participants in on-screen meetings would be inclined to do. Referring to scripts as they went would not, therefore, detract from the realism of the setting, providing it did not hinder the flow of the dialogue.

Prediction Sheet

The prediction sheet does not merely ask teams to pick which of the four suspects they think is guilty, but is structured such that teams can gain points (from a maximum of ten) for showing certain areas of insight without having correctly solved the more difficult elements of the mystery. This will tend to provide the following benefits: (a) to leave a nice spread of scores across the cohort; (b) to let all participants feel they have had at least partial success; and (c) to yield just one (or perhaps two or three) winning teams. The latter is favourable, as it is harder to arrange meaningful prize-giving when an all-or-nothing mystery has been solved equally, or not at all, by a large number of teams.

This graduated structure does, however, require careful marking of the submitted prediction sheets. A template correct answer is provided to aid with this. All but one element has a multiple-choice answer,

and this helps minimise the need for someone to read and apply subjective interpretation to essay-style answers.

The prediction sheet is designed not only to capture a team's answers, but to help guide them through the logical process of solving the mystery, if they read it with due care. However, offering the teams this degree of help ahead of them viewing the first act risks making the exercise overly easy, allowing them to match theories to clues as they are being presented. A system that requires your sleuths to think back over the entirety of the presentation in search of answers should offer a better degree of challenge. For this reason, the prediction sheet should not be issued until the interval. Sufficient time should be allowed for team members to peruse the sheet before needing to agree upon their answers.

Interactive Questioning (Optional)

Allowing teams to pose questions to the surviving members of the cast during the interval is a popular option in the murder mystery play format. It adds to the sense of interaction and can help make a relatively short two-act play feel more like a full evening's entertainment.

A typical approach is to advise the audience that the guilty party will give false answers to avoid detection, while the innocent parties will answer truthfully. In practice, however, cast members – guilty and innocent alike – will tend to give rather terse and unexpansive answers to avoid being overly informative or speaking beyond the knowledge their character is supposed to have of events. Sessions thus have a tendency to reveal little of interest. Worse still, if one team happened to have made a useful leap of logic and sought to pose a question to confirm it, they might inadvertently be giving away their advantage to the competitors merely by mentioning the theory, let alone by getting too positive an answer in response.

To remedy this and to offer better control over the release of the information needed to solve *Dead as a Shed*, it is recommended that questions are put only to the two police officers, Nook and Blanchard, or just to one or the other of them, if that suits better. By the end of Act 1, the audience learns that the two investigators have solved the mystery. It shouldn't need saying that the investigators will not issue any false responses. By close advance study of the questioning notes provided below, the two actors should be able to give suitably encouraging answers to insightful questions whilst knowing when to refuse to disclose information that is overly helpful. "We're not able to disclose that information at the present time," would be a useful phrase to employ in such a scenario.

Similarly, teams should be advised by the master of ceremonies or the investigators (or both) to be wary of seeking confirmation by too direct a line of questioning on a promising theory that they alone may have alighted upon. Phrasing a line of enquiry more obliquely would be less likely to give away a strong lead.

Dead as a Shed

[Script Excerpt]

Characters

Females

Abigail Pounder – clerk of Cuddington Parish Council
Detective Sergeant Stephanie Nook – the investigating officer
Kimberley Strut – solicitor representing Mr Cooper
Superintendent Vicky Blanchard – the case review officer

Males

Ted Cooper – the accused, trading as Ted's Sheds
Rev. Trevor Bishop – parish clergyman
Lysander Bell – village historian

Act 1

Scene 1

(Lights up. Each of the seven characters occupies a seat and provides the physical representation of their character's on-screen presence in the remote meeting. A light, sign, or similar indicates when each is 'on' the call, or 'off'. Nook goes 'on'. All others go 'on' shortly after, except Blanchard, who remains 'off'.)

Nook: Hello again, everyone. Detective Sergeant Stephanie Nook here. Bedfordshire Police Serious Crime Investigation Unit. Thank you all for joining.

Ted: **(Grumpily.)** Here we go again.

Nook: Hello, Mr Cooper.

Ted: Listen, Nook, as the falsely accused, I am invoking my right to remain silent.

Nook: Well, we can come on to procedural considerations once we've finished the introductions...

Ted: Oh no, Nook, you just hold on one second. I've agreed to take part in this case review to push things along as a service to the people of Bedfordshire. But as for your procedural considerations, you can stick those where the sun don't shine.

Lysander: Luton?

Kimberley: Ted, it's Kimberley Strut here from the solicitors. As your legal representative, you can always let me... you know... represent you. **(Pause.)** Legally.

Ted: Thank you. Did you hear that, Nook? I've got back-up. So don't even think about trying to make me talk. Because if you do try to trick me into saying anything, Ms Strut here is fully authorised to jump in and remain silent on my behalf.

Abigail: Cooper, you never shut up long enough for anyone to *need* to make you talk.

Ted: All the petty bureaucrats of the district together cannot make me talk. Not you, Ms Abigail Pounder, feared overlord of the parish council. Not you, Reverend Trevor Bishop...

Trevor: What did *I* do?

Ted: **(Proceeding unchecked.)** Braying mouthpiece of the church. And certainly not you, Lysander Bell, Cuddington's most over-exposed...

Lysander: **(Cutting in smoothly and rapidly.)** Local historian and published author.

Ted: **(Proceeding unchecked.)** Pompous muppet. None of you can make me talk. So there!

Nook: Okay, but shall we just...?

Trevor: Can you hear Jasper barking out there? Third time today he's been at it.

Lysander: Not another corpse under one of your sheds, I hope, Cooper.

Nook: Don't worry, there's no barking noise coming over here.

Kimberley: Or here, Reverend.

Abigail: (Crossly.) Well, it's certainly coming over here. Right across the grounds.

Trevor: Ah, in the office are you, Abigail? I could probably wave at you.

Abigail: Never mind waving at me, Trevor. Govern your confounded dog.

Trevor: He's enjoying himself.

Abigail: By which you mean running wild on parish land.

Lysander: Interesting statement.

Abigail: He's worse than the last one.

Trevor: The historic tenancy agreement allows the occupant of the vicarage to keep one pet and to allow said animal to roam freely within the fenced area. As well you know. My Jasper never goes beyond the styles. He's a good boy. Vivacious yet unassuming. As far as civil liberties are concerned, it's *his* garden.

Lysander: As far as common law is concerned, it's a footpath on the district's definitive map, along which the public may pass and re-pass without limitation. And should be able to do so, in my humble opinion, without fear of being brutalised.

Trevor: He's only a puppy. You have to let a puppy express its enthusiasm somewhere.

Abigail: Well, are you going to bring him to order, Trevor, or not?

Trevor: No, not now the meeting's started.

Lysander: *Has* the meeting started, DS Nook?

Nook: Well, not exactly, Mr Bell. We're just waiting for Superintendent Blanchard, who is a reviewing officer assigned from a different force. It seems she's been delayed a couple of minutes by a... (pauses to read her screen) oh, an injury.

Trevor: It's your fault, anyway, Abigail.

Abigail: How can it possibly be *my* fault? I've never even met the woman.

Trevor: Jasper's barking is your fault. It's that lighting system you had installed around the wishing well just before all this rotten shed business.

Abigail: How's that upsetting him? It's only designed to come on if you go right up to it and throw coins in. You're not telling me you've taught the wretched creature *that* trick?

Kimberley: You wouldn't see it in daylight anyway, would you?

Trevor: It's developed a squeal. Intermittent, I think. But very high-pitched. I can't hear it myself but Morgan, my young nephew, he came over the other day and he could hear it clear as a bell. It must be like a dog-whistle to Jasper.

Abigail: (Grumpily.) Okay, I'll have it looked at.

Nook: If we might return to some administrative matters. You're all aware, I trust, that your participation in this meeting is voluntary and that nothing discussed today will be treated as admissible as evidence in any legal proceedings, but that the meeting is being recorded.

Kimberley: Agreed. And we give permission for that recording to be held and replayed by the investigating team, at their pleasure.

Nook: (Self-deprecating.) It certainly won't be at *my* pleasure. I can't stand hearing my voice played back.

Ted: How do you think *we* feel? We have to hear it in real time.

Kimberley: Ted, enough.

Nook: Ah, here she is now.

(Blanchard goes 'on'. Her head bears a bloodied bandage.)

Blanchard: Sorry I'm late. Is this everyone, DS Nook?

Nook: Yes, Ma'am. I'll do introductions, if that's alright.

Blanchard: Please do.

Abigail: Is your head okay? I think there's blood coming through your dressing.

Nook: Trouble there at the station, Ma'am?

Blanchard: No, nothing like that. I dropped a certificate while I was fumbling with the keys to one of those blasted lockable notice boards. The front window section swung open as I bent down to retrieve it, and what did I do? Only went and clonked my thick head on it as I stood up.

Trevor: Heavens.

Blanchard: Wretched document got covered in blood, so I couldn't display it anyway.

Nook: What was it supposed to say?

Blanchard: Eighteen months since the last health and safety incident.

Nook: Are you well enough to proceed, Ma'am?

Blanchard: Yes, do please carry on.

Nook: Okay, so to recap, this relates to the Austin Grinter case of nine months ago. The unfortunate man's body was found at the village wishing well one Sunday morning last June.

Blanchard: By whom?

Nook: The village walking group. They're early risers. It was adjacent to an area of ground cleared for the new parish council shed. Those of you familiar with the first phase of our...

Ted: Incompetence.

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[Continued in the full murder mystery pack...]