

THE INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE  
STUDY GUIDE

prepared for

**Dial "M" for  
MURDER**

Playwright: FREDERICK KNOTT

Directed by: PAUL MOSER

Sets designed by RUSS METHENY

Costumes by GAIL BRASSARD

Lights by MICHAEL LINCOLN

Guide compiled by JANET ALLEN

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## DIAL "M" FOR MURDER RINGS WITH INTRIGUE

Thriller, mystery, detective drama, whodunit--these are the categories of theatre and film with which we associate feelings of surprise, intrigue, and sometimes horror. Master of film suspense Alfred Hitchcock defines suspense as the stretching out of anticipation, a state in which the audience has all the facts but at least one character in the story is unaware of the exact (and often dangerous) circumstances he is in. Hitchcock defines the whodunit as an intellectual puzzle which generates a kind of curiosity but is void of emotion. Consequently, he tended to prefer the suspense thriller form, in which a strong emotional involvement from an audience is one of the key results.

Hitchcock filmed DIAL "M" FOR MURDER in 1953, creating from a classic stage thriller a classic suspense film. Playwright Frederick Knott's plot had many elements in common with Hitchcock's own film writing: a surprise reversal in the murder sequence in which the intended victim becomes the murderer, a secret clue which goes unnoticed for many suspense-building minutes, and a revealing ending which surprises even the audience member who has carefully followed the investigation.

Associate Artistic Director Paul Moser directs this classic British stage thriller with Resident Acting Company members Karen Nelson playing Margot Wendice, and Frank Raiter playing Inspector Hubbard. The majority of the cast is new to IRT: Seth Jones plays Margot's scheming husband Tony, Michael Minor plays Max, Margot's American friend, and John Herzog plays the mysterious Captain Lesgate. Russ Metheny, set designer for BOYS IN AUTUMN teams up again with costume designer Gail Brassard to recreate the necessary environment for murder and intrigue.

French filmmaker Francois Truffaut, a long-time devotee of Hitchcock's work and collaborator on an interview book with him claimed: DIAL M FOR MURDER is one of the Hitchcock pictures I see over and over again. I enjoy it more every time I see it." The play, too, has this unique effect: those who remember the plot will be drawn into its suspense with a force equal to that of the uninitiated, because like many a good thriller, the audience is in possession of all the facts--the suspense comes in how, and when the characters will learn of their intriguing fates.

# IN THE WINGS

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## Dial "M" for MURDER

*Grace Kelly makes the fatal phone call in the 1954 film version of DIAL "M" FOR MURDER.*

A telephone rings in a comfortably furnished room. A shadowy figure creeps out of hiding. A murder takes place and a body slumps to the floor. A distraught woman, nightmare written all over her face, paces in the dark as rain falls softly. These are familiar images which conjure up the world of the suspense thriller-- a world where it always seems to be night, always foggy or wet, filled with sobs or gunshots, where men wear turned-down brimmed hats and women loom in fur coats. The suspense thriller, mystery or detective genre as they are variously called has proved a favorite with American audiences for generations. Prior to assuming a predominant standing in midnight television, the suspense thriller was perfected on the stage. Englishman Frederick Knott wrote in this genre in the late 40's and 50's, diverging from the standard "whodunnit" format into plot structures in which the audience learns who the murderer is but the characters must piece the truth together.

Alfred Hitchcock made a film of Knott's stage play in 1954 with Grace Kelly, Robert Cummings, Ray Milland, John Williams and Anthony Dawson. In keeping with his belief that a stage play should not be opened up to include outside locations, the film was shot almost entirely within the apartment set that Knott's play calls for.

Like many a good thriller, Knott's play is based on the sin of greed. And of course, the moral of the story, like most thrillers, is that crime doesn't pay-- even very well planned crime. Knott's DIAL "M" creates a world of comfort oddly inhabited by anxiety; it is not surprising that Hitchcock was drawn to this script as a vehicle for his own brand of "suspicion effect," where something sinister lurks at the heart of the most familiar and comfortable



*Ray Milland in Alfred Hitchcock's DIAL "M" FOR MURDER*



*Robert Cummings with Grace Kelly*

locations. One of the favorite twists of Knott's play is that although the murder itself backfires, the desired result of the murder is nearly borne out. Since we can't tell you any more of the plot without giving the whole thing away, we'll let Hitchcock's pictures provoke your interest in our upcoming production of DIAL "M" FOR MURDER.

## DIAL "M" FOR MURDER SYNOPSIS

The lights come up on the comfortable London apartment of Tony and Margot Wendice. We find Margot and her American ex-lover Max relating stories of their lives from the past year. Margot tells Max of a letter he sent her that was stolen and used to blackmail her. Enter Margot's "ideal" husband Tony an aging professional tennis player. He is apparently unaware of Max and Margot's past affair. Tony and Max get along well enough that Tony invites Max to a men's party to be held the following evening. Tony suggests that Max take Margot to the theatre tonight as Tony finds himself unable to go. As soon as Margot and Max leave for the evening, Tony phones Captain Lesgate to inquire about buying a car and asks him over to settle the deal.

When Lesgate arrives Tony seems to realize that Lesgate is really C.A. Swann, an acquaintance from college days. He tells Lesgate of Margot's affair, how he stole the letter, and that she has named Tony sole beneficiary in her will. By revealing many sordid facts about Lesgate's past Tony manages to blackmail him into murdering Margot.

The next evening Tony's elaborate plan seems to be working smoothly. He and Max depart for the party. After working in Tony's scrapbook, Margot goes to bed. Lesgate enters using the key Tony planted under the rug on the stairs. Tony phones Margot to lure her from her room and before she can find out who is calling, Lesgate begins to strangle her. They struggle and she stabs him in the back with scissors, thus killing him and foiling Tony's plot.

The following day the police enter the scene to question the couple. Between Inspector Hubbard's suspicions and Tony's influence, Margot is accused of murdering Lesgate who was allegedly blackmailing her. She is tried and sentenced to death.

Tony believing himself to be free and clear carelessly spends the one thousand pounds he had saved as fee for the murder. A suspicious Max has thought up a scheme to save Margot and tries to get Tony to tell the police that he conspired to kill Margot. Hubbard then steps in to question Tony about where he got the money he recently spent and while Hubbard is there, Max manages to convince him that the murder conspiracy theory could indeed be true. Margot is brought home just in time to hear of Tony's plot and to watch him fall into a police set-up. The lights dim to blackout as Tony finds that all his scheming was in vain. He has proved himself guilty of murder.

## ANATOMY OF A THRILLER

DIAL "M" FOR MURDER, unquestionably one of the most internationally performed suspense plays of the mid-century, came to the theatre by a circuitous route. After devoting fully eighteen months to its completion, Frederick Knott submitted his play to a number of London managements, prominent and otherwise, but he unvaryingly met with defeat in his attempts to gain a production. Disillusioned but undaunted, he finally consented to its presentation on British television. It received an excellent press, enthralled several million viewers, and even more significantly, caught the perspicacious eye of producer James E. Sherwood, who detected its theatrical potentials. Under his auspices, the play finally reached its destination, a West End stage, on the evening of June 19, 1952. Praised as "one of the most brilliant and ingenious thrillers London has seen in decades," DIAL M FOR MURDER ran for 425 performances at the Westminster Theatre and also achieved the historic honor of being the first television production to be adapted for the British theatre.

With Maurice Evans, in one of his infrequent appearances in a contemporary role, at the helm of a splendid company, the play opened at the Plymouth Theatre, New York, on October 29, 1952, and again incited chills and cheers. In his coverage for The New York Times, Brooks Atkison summarized the event as "remarkably good theatre, tingling with excitement." The critical verdict was unanimous: DIAL "M" FOR MURDER had provided "more melodramatic excitement than Broadway had experienced in years; a constantly absorbing play which holds your attention like a vise." And it did, for 552 performances.

Within a few years, DIAL "M" FOR MURDER had successfully played in 27 countries and in 18 languages. There was one rather rude exception: the suspense drama had dialed a wrong number in Moscow. The well-known Pushkin Drama Theatre and the Leningrad Comedy Theatre had been presenting a Russian translation of the play under the title TELEPHONE CALL, and it had aroused considerable interest on the part of the Soviet theatre-going public. That is, it did until the Communist party newspaper Pravda lowered the boom on the thriller by condemning it as "profoundly alien to Soviet morals." Undampened by the official Soviet chill, the play none-the-less continued to be performed in various satellite countries with no perceptible damage to hierarchically established morals.

A master at plot construction, Frederick Knott has reversed the procedure of most suspense plays. In DIAL "M" FOR MURDER the excitement does not arise from trying to solve a murder. The audience, from the outset, knows who instigates the plan. Instead the attention of the audience is held taut not with the suspense that is the major sustaining force of 9 out of 10 mystery plays, but by building the evidence by which the wrong person is convicted of the crime with such circumstantial perfection that the story interest is never dulled. It is one of the theatre's most adroit and ingenious tales of blackmail, murder and sleuthing, and its popularity with theatrical companies continues unabatedly to this day. Ironically, Alfred Hitchcock's 1954 film version of the play (with Ray Milland, Grace Kelly, Robert Cummings and John Williams) has become one of the staples of television's late shows, thus restoring Mr. Knott's work to its original presentational media.

Reginald Denham, himself a thriller playwright and director of the original stage production of DIAL "M" FOR MURDER, outlines four ingredients vital to the success of a mystery/suspense play. First, the play must possess some humor, "cunningly introduced at psychological moments when the suspense is well-nigh unbearable." Second, the audience must be able to identify with the characters, thus feeling "this could happen to me, my family or my friends." This sense of identification intensifies the impact, removing it from the level of mere case study. Third, there must be available audience participation: "a few seconds of terror or anguish registered vocally, a shudder based on psychology." Fourth, the end of the play must not be too tightly tied together; "there should be an avenue for speculation after you have left the play, an intriguing area for discussion and argument wherein audience members may exercise the ingenuity of their minds."

Thrillers have come a long way since the "creaking door dramas" that were popular in the early decades of this century. After all those bodies had fallen out of innumerable stage closets and clutching hands had receded to the dark and dreadful passages concealed by mysterious wall panels, mysteries turned a new and most welcome corner. They developed into the psychological thriller, a change from the direct to the indirect, where hair-raising effects were subordinated to the greater validity of situation and character. Characters were no longer puppets without psychology or truth, and the fright delivered to audiences has become more emotional, less based on fear of death than fear of pervasive psychological evil, less an exercise of the nerves than an exercise of the mind.

It is erroneous to deny the mystery and suspense play its rightful place in the history of drama just as it is presumptuous to classify it as a second-class theatre citizen. Perhaps the vast commercial success of a number of the genre has overshadowed the significant fact that many were warmly endorsed by the most erudite and the crustiest of critics. There always are among us those self-appointed elitists who automatically associate mass public acceptance with inferiority of taste and product. Yet, while the critics may offer their blessings, it is the public who must offer its patronage in order for a play to survive. The fact that many fine thrillers have enjoyed enormous audience popularity on stage and in various metamorphoses in other media has proven unequivocally that they have fulfilled one of the theatre's major functions, which is to entertain.

Edited by Janet Allen from  
articles by Theatre critic  
Stanley Richards

"Someday fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no reason at all."

Tom Neal

"My theory is that people who don't like mystery stories are anarchists."

Rex Stout

"The myths of the detective story satisfy the secret nostalgias of modern man who, knowing himself to be fallen and limited dreams of one day becoming an exceptional character, a hero."

Mircea Eliade