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Family Plays

***The Infamous
Soothing System
of
Professor
Maillard***

***Drama adapted by
Raleigh Marcell Jr.***

***Based on
Edgar Allan Poe's***

The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether

The Infamous Soothing System of Professor Maillard

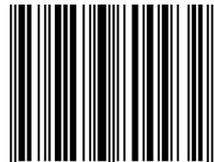
Drama. *Adapted by Raleigh Marcell Jr. Based on Edgar Allan Poe's short story The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether. Cast: 14+ actors, flexible.* The play begins when the hero of the story decides to visit the private sanitarium operated by the renowned Professor Maillard. The professor is famous for his method of treating the insane, a method widely known as "The Soothing System." The hero enters the establishment just as a grand party given by the doctor is about to begin. But Professor Maillard has not been heard from for some time. What happens during the party, the professor's explanation of his soothing system, and the activities of the unusual characters are comical and frightening—with an ending that may come as a surprise. It is excellent entertainment and a superb contest play for all groups. The play has humor and comedy—a rarity for Poe. It also features Poe's intriguing air of mystery and imagination and the threatening cloud of horror. Subtlety is the keynote of the play. The movements and activities of the guests must be subtle enough so that the audience will suspect that they are insane but not be sure until the end. At the beginning of the play the characters act normal, with just the barest hint that all may not be as it seems. Poe's story and this play are carefully constructed to reveal more and more of the eccentric personalities of the characters as the play develops to its mad conclusion. All the roles may be performed by either men or women—of virtually any age. In fact, this script was developed by an all-female cast in a theatre workshop at Mount Carmel Academy, an all-girls school in Louisiana. It can be done by an all-male cast as well. The cast may be enlarged by adding more party guests. *Costumes may be modern or period. The play may be altered by dropping the few modern allusions and expressions to set the play in the 19th century, as Poe's story was. The costumes, like the action, may subtly hint at the oddness of the characters. Perhaps some of the costumes don't fit properly. In other cases, the pieces may not quite match. Outlandish costumes (like farcical action) are not recommended. Professor Maillard is a distinguished-looking character; formally dressed—the essence of calmness and civility. The hero's costume should contrast with the others—perhaps he wears jeans or a hiking costume. The young lady removes some of her clothes (just how much she removes depends on community standards); her costume must be designed accordingly. Approximate running time: 25 to 30 minutes. Code: IC8.*

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The Infamous Soothing
System of Professor Maillard

**THE INFAMOUS SOOTHING SYSTEM
OF PROFESSOR MAILLARD**

**A Play in One Act
by
RALEIGH MARCELL, Jr.**

Based on a story by Edgar Allan Poe

Family Plays

311 Washington St., Woodstock, IL 60098

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RALEIGH MARCELL, JR.

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(THE INFAMOUS SOOTHING SYSTEM OF PROFESSOR MAILLARD)

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**THE INFAMOUS SOOTHING SYSTEM
of PROFESSOR MAILLARD**

CAST

[Cast members may be male or female]

The Friend

The Hero

Professor Maillard

The Young Lady

Man 1

Lady 1

Man 2

Lady 2

Man 3

Lady 3

Man 4

Lady 4

Man 5

Lady 5

(Additional Party Guests, if desired)

Place: The ballroom of a private sanitarium for the mentally disturbed

Time: Today. Or yesterday. Or perhaps Tuesday

ABOUT THE PLAY

THE INFAMOUS SOOTHING SYSTEM OF PROFESSOR MAILLARD is based on Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether." The story has humor and comedy – a rarity in Poe's fiction.

The play begins when the Hero of the story decides to visit the private sanitarium operated by the renowned Professor Maillard. The Professor is famous for his method of treating the insane, a method widely known as "The Soothing System."

The Hero enters the establishment just as a grand party given by the doctor is about to begin. What happens during the party, the Professor's explanation of his Soothing System, and the activities of the unusual characters are both comical and frightening – with an ending that may come as a surprise.

All the roles in this experimental play may be performed by either men or women – of virtually any age. In fact, this script was developed by an all-female cast in a theatre workshop at Mount Carmel Academy, an all-girls school in Louisiana. It can be done by an all-male cast as well. The cast may be enlarged by adding more party guests.

PRODUCTION NOTES*Properties*

Gold pocket watch on silver chain – Prof. Maillard
 2 or 3 glasses of wine on a tray – Lady 2
 Several plates of hors d'oeuvres – on table
 Assorted beverages, glasses, paper plates, napkins – on table
 Tray of snacks – Lady 1
 Plate of cheese snacks – Lady 2
 Handkerchief – Lady 5

The Cast

For convenience in identifying the various members of the cast, here is a breakdown of their "eccentricities":

Man 1 – Teapot
 Lady 1 – Swiss cheese
 Man 2 – Jackass (use "donkey" if "jackass" is objectionable)
 Lady 2 – Cigarette
 Man 3 – Champagne
 Lady 3 – Two heads (Cicero & Demosthenes)
 Man 4 – Frog
 Lady 4 – Chicken
 Man 5 – Pumpkin
 Lady 5 – Top

The Friend may double as one of the party guests. For a larger cast, add more party guests (they do not need special eccentricities, although they should join in the general reaction and in the final mad romp). During the action of the play, the guests should be placed in conversational groupings, serving themselves from the snacks and refreshments. Any of the characters may be male or female. They may range in age from young to elderly.

Subtlety is the keynote of this play. The movements and activities of the guests must be subtle enough so that the audience will suspect that they are insane, but not be sure until the end. At the beginning of the play the characters act normal, with just the barest hint that all may not be as it seems. Poe's story and this play are carefully constructed to reveal more and more of the eccentric personalities of the characters as the play develops to its mad conclusion.

Costumes and make-up

This play has a timelessness; it could happen anywhere, any time. The few modern allusions (e.g., Marlboro cigarettes) are balanced by the faint aroma of sachet, old lace, and superficial gentility. Consequently, costumes may be modern or period. Groups wanting a costume play may drop the few modern allusions and expressions and set the play in the nineteenth century, as Poe's story was.

The costumes, like the action, may subtly hint at the oddness of the characters. Perhaps some of the costumes don't fit properly. In other cases, the pieces may not quite match. Outlandish costumes (like farcical action) are not recommended.

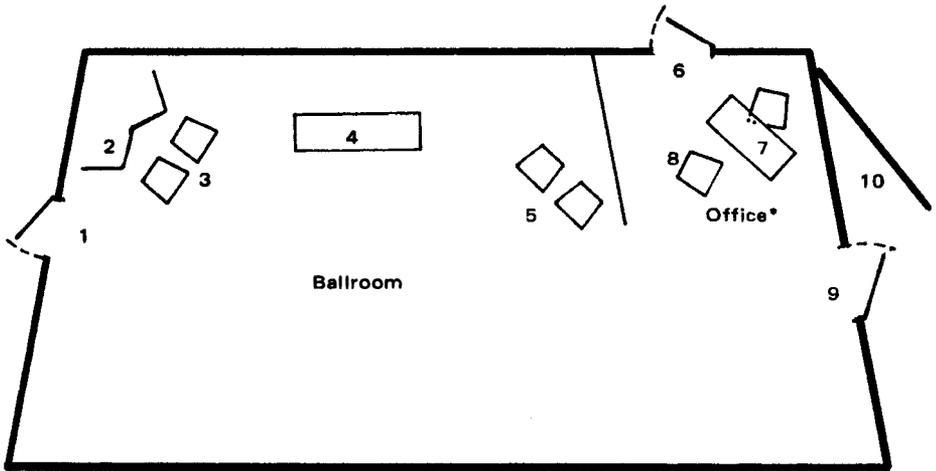
Professor Maillard is a distinguished-looking man, formally dressed—the essence of calmness and civility.

The Hero's costume should contrast with the others—perhaps he wears jeans or a hiking costume.

The Young Lady removes some of her clothes (just how much she removes depends on community standards); her costume must be designed accordingly.

Music

The author's recommendations for background music (if desired) are given on page 11.

The Set

*The Office may be played on the apron or some other area separate from the main stage since it is used only briefly at the beginning of the play.

- 1 – Door to interior of the establishment
- 2 – Folding screen
- 3 – 2 chairs
- 4 – Table with snacks and refreshments
- 5 – 2 straight chairs
- 6 – Door to interior
- 7 – Desk and chair
- 8 – Chair
- 9 – Door to outside
- 10 – Exterior backing

Additional chairs and small tables may be added in the ballroom. Trim props may be added as desired.

THE INFAMOUS SOOTHING SYSTEM OF PROF. MAILLARD

By Raleigh Marcell, Jr.

[The curtain remains closed (or the stage remains dark). After a moment the HERO and FRIEND enter the apron from Right. As they speak, they progress to the Left, the FRIEND pointing out the sights]

FRIEND. . . . and there is the famous Cathedral of Saint Jude built in 1432.

HERO. How magnificent! Ah, what a view . . . *[His eyes sweep the panorama, then fix on something on the Left]* But, my friend, what is that building there? Is it a castle?

FRIEND. At the foot of the hill?

HERO. Yes.

FRIEND. That is an insane asylum.

HERO. Indeed?

FRIEND. *[Off-handedly, trying to re-interest Hero in something more to the Right]* Operated by a Professor Maillard, I believe. But if you will look here —

HERO. *[But HERO continues to Left]* Ah, Professor Maillard . . . I know the name. I've read some of his works. I'd like to see the place . . .

FRIEND. *[Agitated, pulling Hero back]* No! No . . . L — let's go on. I want to show you some more interesting things.

HERO. What could be more interesting than seeing this Professor Maillard's System in operation?

FRIEND. "System"?

HERO. Yes . . . It comes back to me now. A famous treatment for the insane . . . I remember reading that the Professor's treatment became very widespread — the accepted method of handling the mentally disturbed. But the System broke down, and Professor Maillard disappeared . . .

FRIEND. Do you suppose he hid out of shame?

HERO. No one knows.

FRIEND. *[A bit interested now . . .]* But what was his "System"?

HERO. The newspapers called it the "Soothing System." As I understand it, all confinement and negative treatment of the inmates were to be avoided. They were even allowed to roam about the house and grounds in ordinary street clothes, without any supervision at all.

FRIEND. Amazing!

HERO. I *must* speak with Professor Maillard . . . if that really is his institution.

FRIEND. You musn't! [*Pulling him back to Right*] I haven't yet shown you the reflecting pools . . .

HERO. [*Pulling himself loose, going Left*] I can't be talked out of it. I'm going to see the asylum. Are you coming?

FRIEND. No . . . I will never set foot in an asylum — of my own free will.

HERO. Very well then . . . I'll go alone.

[HERO walks Left and exits. FRIEND watches him a moment and then runs fearfully off Right.

The curtain opens (or stage lights come up) on the interior of the asylum. The upper portion of the Stage Left area is an office, with a desk, a couple of chairs, and a door in the Up Left wall. There is another door in the Left wall, but this door does not open directly into the office (see floor plan, p. 23). The rest of the stage is a ballroom with a table at Up Center and a folding screen at Up Right. There are several chairs, including two in front of the screen and two near the wall dividing the office from the ballroom. There is a door in the Right wall.

MAN 1, a wild-eyed little person with a moustache, comes skittering through the Up Left door. He stands on tip-toes, opening a peephole. (Or, if peephole is impractical, he opens the door a crack)]

MAN 1. Yes . . . ?

HERO. Professor Maillard?

MAN 1. Go away! [*Closes peephole (or slams door) and starts away but is stopped by continued knocking*]

HERO. Professor Maillard? I wish . . .

MAN 1. Do you wish to see him?

HERO. Yes!

MAN 1. No one may see him.

HERO. Look here, I —

MAN 1. Please go away. [*Slams the peephole and skitters off through the Upstage door*]

[HERO continues to knock. PROFESSOR MAILLARD enters Up Left and crosses to the door. MAN 1 follows warily]

MAILLARD. What seems to be the problem?

HERO. I wish to see Professor Maillard.

MAILLARD. And for what purpose?

HERO. To discuss his famous System.

MAILLARD. [*Carefully checking through the peephole (or opened door)*] Are you alone?

HERO. Yes.

MAILLARD. [*Relieved, opening door*] Please come in. [*MAILLARD escorts HERO into office area Up Left. Hero takes off his hat, depositing it on the head of MAN 1, who leaves Up Left*]

HERO. You must be Professor Maillard. [*MAILLARD gracefully half-bows*] You see, your doorman wouldn't –

MAILLARD. He's a foolish fellow. Please accept my deepest apologies. Won't you sit down?

[During the following dialogue, the GUESTS begin to arrive through the door Right milling around, miming conversation, but not detracting from the business in the office]

MAILLARD. Now, what can I do for you, young man?

HERO. I've come to study . . . to see . . . your famous Soothing System in operation. Frankly, I'm surprised to find you here. No one's seen or heard from you for several years. All your colleagues thought you were dead.

MAILLARD. You mean, they *hoped* I was dead . . . And the Soothing System – what have you heard of it?

HERO. Nothing first hand, I'm afraid.

MAILLARD. Then you shall hear it directly from me, my young friend. And perhaps you can go out into the world and reveal the true facts.

HERO. Is your System still in operation?

MAILLARD. [*Checking his watch, a pocket watch on a long silver chain; he checks it quite often*] Ah, dear me. I have guests in the house. If you will excuse me a moment . . .

[MAILLARD crosses Right to join the party. The GUESTS freeze in tableau. The YOUNG LADY enters quietly Up Left and stands, unseen by the HERO, behind his chair. After a moment he begins to feel her presence but does not look. She is an animated, frail, and

nervous type. Her movements are short quick jabs. She is flagrantly romantic and emotional. Finally she speaks]

YOUNG LADY. Hello.

HERO. Yes . . . Good evening. [*He starts to rise*]

YOUNG LADY. Oh, don't get up. Do you find it warm?

HERO. No. I'm quite comfortable.

YOUNG LADY. You're new here. I mean, have you just arrived?

HERO. Yes.

YOUNG LADY. [*Secretively*] What are you here for?

HERO. To see Professor Maillard . . . [*He starts to rise again*]

YOUNG LADY. [*Pushing him back in his seat*] Don't get up . . .

I'll sit, too. [*She sits*]

HERO. Are you, uh . . . one of his guests?

YOUNG LADY. [*Coyly*] You might say that. [*Awkward pause*]

HERO. Nice weather . . . [*Another pause after which she jumps to her feet*]

YOUNG LADY. I recite!

HERO. How nice . . .

YOUNG LADY. [*Circling behind him*] I interpret in terms of my own feelings . . . and desires.

HERO. Professor Maillard said he'd be back soon . . . [*He attempts to get up but she pushes him down*]

YOUNG LADY. He's always so busy! He has so many guests I never get a chance to talk with him. May I recite for you? You wouldn't mind, would you? I mean, since you're waiting and all . . . ?

HERO. Oh sure — go ahead. I'd be . . . delighted.

YOUNG LADY.

I stand amid the roar
 Of a surf-tormented shore,
 And I hold within my hand
 Grains of the golden sand —
 How few! Yet how they creep
 Through my fingers to the deep,
 While I weep — while I weep!
 O God! Can I not grasp [*grabbing Hero by lapels*]
 Them with a tighter clasp?
 O God! Can I not save
 One from the pitiless wave?
 Is *all* that we see or seem
 But a dream within a dream?

[Pause. Party unfreezes. Re-enter MAILLARD from the party]

MAILLARD. Sorry to keep you waiting . . . Ah, I see you've had a bit of entertainment, eh? How did you like it?

HERO. *[Not quite sure what to say]* Oh, I found it very interesting.

YOUNG LADY. Thank you. I have a lot more I could . . .

MAILLARD. *[Politely but firmly]* My dear, I think the young man has heard enough for the time being.

YOUNG LADY. *[Saddened]* Very well . . .

HERO. *[Standing]* I really did enjoy your recitation.

MAILLARD. *[To Young Lady]* Shouldn't you be with our other guests? *[She leaves reluctantly, joining party]* You have to be firm with them or they'll become quite spoiled.

HERO. Yes, I can quite imagine.

MAILLARD. Certainly . . . Now, where were we? *[Sits]*

HERO. The System. Your System. I can presume she is an example of it.

MAILLARD. I'm afraid I don't follow.

HERO. How can I put it . . . ?

MAILLARD. Oh! Ah, I see. No-no. She's a member of my family. My niece.

HERO. I'm very sorry, sir. A thousand apologies. I had no idea . . .

MAILLARD. No need to apologize . . . *[LADY 2 enters Up Left with a tray of glasses of wine. MAILLARD takes two, giving one to Hero. LADY 2 leaves through Up Left door]* You seem a bit shaken. The wine will do you good.

HERO. Thank you. *[Takes wine and sits]* Now about . . .

MAILLARD. The System was the essence of simplicity. It consisted of avoiding all confinement of the patients and of letting them roam about free of restraints and supervision.

HERO. I at least know that much. That was why I was rather confused about your . . . niece.

[HERO and MAILLARD freeze. MEN 4 and 5 and LADY 4 are Down Right in a little group]

MAN 4. Oh, you must try these frogs' legs.

LADY 4. How can you bring yourself to eat those? Isn't that cruel?

MAN 4. Well, they *have* been cooked.

MAN 5. *[Shyly, quietly]* Please try some of my pumpkin pie.

LADY 4. Won't you have some chicken?