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Dramatic Publishing

DEATH AND TAXES

**An Audience Participation
Mystery Comedy**

**by
PAT COOK**



Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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(DEATH AND TAXES)

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DEATH AND TAXES

An Audience Participation Mystery Comedy In One Act
For Four Men and Five Women

CHARACTERS

- KATHLEEN LYLES . . . mayor of Hendricks, rather stylish, 45
EDDIE KING editor of the Hendricks *Herald*,
pushy, brash, mid-30s
LYDIA KLEFT secretary at city hall, mousey, 25
WESLEY THORNE the sheriff,
built like a one-time football player, 30
CARL JOHANSEN a sarcastic citizen, around 40
MATTIE JOHANSEN . . . Carl's wife, a no-nonsense type, 30
CORA SEDGEWICKthe epitome of the nosy neighbor,
mid-50s
DR. EFREM BISHOP standard country doctor,
quarrelsome man, around 55
EVELYN MARTINDALEdrama teacher with an eye for
what's correct and an ear for when it's not, 30

TIME: The present.

PLACE: Hendricks High School auditorium.

ACT ONE

SETTING: *The stage at the Hendricks High School is the setting for this rather unorthodox hearing. It has been divided into two sections. L holds a row of six chairs. R has been set up to resemble the living room belonging to CARL JOHANSEN. There is a couch with a chair on its R arm. A white cloth sets on its R arm and one on its back. A coffee table is in front of the couch. On it rests a National Geographic magazine, a box of matches, a playing card—the king of hearts, an ashtray, a key ring with six keys and a chess set. The chess set is located on the R end of the table, with a black knight missing. Before the lights come up, a radio announcement is heard, as if part of a radio news broadcast.*

ANNOUNCER (*fading in*). ...but no matter what the governor said, he still could not explain his brother unconscious on the pool table. On to other news, over in Hendricks, Miss Cora Sedgewick went visiting her neighbors two days ago and got a bit of a shock. Sitting on the neighbors' couch was a stranger. Stranger still, the young man was dead. Ruled natural causes, it nonetheless gave Miss Sedgewick something of a shock. The young man is still unidentified as we go to press. A town council meeting is scheduled for tonight and I wouldn't be surprised if somebody brought the matter up, just to break the monotony.

On to the weather. Seems like we're in for more of the same...*(He fades out.)*

(The lights come up and we find LYDIA is seated in the far L chair. Next to her is WESLEY, with EDDIE, KATHLEEN, CARL and CORA filling out the rest of the chairs. LYDIA seems to be going through her notes. KATHLEEN waits for a beat, looks at her watch and nudges EDDIE.)

KATHLEEN. Isn't she ready yet?

EDDIE. How would I know?

KATHLEEN. Well, we need to get this thing started.

EDDIE. Why don't you start it? You're the mayor.

KATHLEEN. 'Cause that's why I got a secretary. I run the town government and she runs the town meetings.

EDDIE. And both of them are stuck.

KATHLEEN. Why don't you save that for your dubious editorials?

EDDIE. You calling me a liar? Why, that's something of a compliment, coming from a professional like you.

LYDIA. Just a second...I'll...I'll be right with you. *(She rises and moves forward.)* Uhm...settle down now and we'll...we'll get down to business. *(She finally finds a form.)* Ah! Here we are. *(She reads.)* "I hereby declare this, the..." let's see...*(She looks at another page.)*...yeah, "the six hundred seventy-seventh meeting of the Hendricks town council in session." Now, tonight we have the usual agenda plus a rather unusual task before us.

WESLEY. Everybody knows why they're here.

LYDIA *(turns to him)*. Hah?

WESLEY *(rises)*. It's been all over town since last weekend.

KATHLEEN *(jumps up)*. What'd you stop her for?

WESLEY. What?

KATHLEEN. You know what you just did?

WESLEY. Well, I just...

LYDIA. Let me start again.

KATHLEEN. Oh, my God! *(She groans and falls back into her chair at the same time as WESLEY, who also groans.)*

LYDIA. I do hereby declare this, the six hundred seventy-seventh meeting of the Hendricks town council, in session. Tonight, well, the thing is, we're here to act as a sort of a coroner's jury.

EDDIE *(jumps up)*. I still say this is illegal!

LYDIA *(looks at the paper)*. No, I said it just like it's written.

WESLEY *(takes the paper)*. Let me see that. *(He takes out a pen and writes on the paper.)*

LYDIA. I called the meeting to order just like I did last time, only I did it a little faster this time.

EDDIE. I mean the town council cannot act as a coroner's jury!

KATHLEEN *(rises)*. There's nothing illegal about it!

EDDIE. Calling it a coroner's jury is illegal.

KATHLEEN. Look, the thing has been the talk of the town since it happened and I think we have to get to the bottom of it and put it to rest.

CARL. Can we pick this up, Mattie's out in the truck.

WESLEY. Carl, we found the guy dead in your living room. I'd think you'd be interested.

CARL. I'm *here*, ain't I? Only thing is we got company coming for the weekend so let's get at it.

WESLEY. Don't let them in the living room.

CARL *(jumps up)*. What's that supposed to mean?

WESLEY. I was just kidding. *(LYDIA snatches her page back from him.)*

KATHLEEN. Will everyone *please!* Just relax until we can, at *least*, get the meeting open. (*Everyone else, except LYDIA, sits.*) Lydia, finish, will you?!

LYDIA. Yes, ma'am. (*She reads.*) "The meeting is hereby initiated, providing it consists of a quorum of hayseeds, red necks and morons." (*She squints hard at this last part.*) Huh? (*WESLEY laughs out loud. KATHLEEN jumps to her feet.*)

KATHLEEN. Sheriff, that's not funny!

WESLEY. Just wanted to see if she'd read it. She did, too.

LYDIA (*hurt*). That's just...just not nice! (*She sits and starts writing. A car horn sounds outside.*)

CARL (*yells*). Gimme a minute, you old...

CORA. Why don't you let that poor woman out of the truck so she can come inside with the rest of us?

CARL. Wadn't *my* idea. She hates the mayor. (*He smiles at KATHLEEN.*) Go ahead, Mayor. (*KATHLEEN glares down at CARL.*)

EDDIE. Heck, if that's the case, we'd *all* be in the truck. (*KATHLEEN glares down at EDDIE.*)

KATHLEEN. If you hate me so much, why didn't you people just keep the last guy in office?

EDDIE. He died.

WESLEY. Maybe he visited Carl's living room.

CARL (*jumps up*). You make one more crack and, sheriff or no, I'm going to hit you upside the head with a tire tool!

WESLEY (*jumps up*). Hey, did you hear that? He's threatening a...a...(*He snaps his fingers.*)

EDDIE. Sheriff?

WESLEY. Naw...uh...

EDDIE. Constable?

WESLEY. Naw...

CARL. Hayseed, red-neck moron?

KATHLEEN. All right, *hold it!* (*Everyone sits again.*) Now.

Where were we?

LYDIA (*reads*). “Hayseed, red-neck moron.”

WESLEY. You wrote that down? (*Car horn sounds again.*)

CARL (*yells back*). Play with the radio!

KATHLEEN. Lydia, just get on with it.

LYDIA. With what?

KATHLEEN. Read the minutes of the last meeting.

LYDIA (*rises*). Uhm...the last meeting of the Hendricks town council, being the six hundred seventy-sixth, uh... was cancelled. (*She sits.*)

EDDIE. If it was cancelled then it wasn't a meeting.

LYDIA. That's impossible.

EDDIE. How do you figure?

LYDIA. Because if we didn't have the meeting in the first place, wouldn't have had to cancel it.

EDDIE. That's just it! We didn't have the meeting in the first place!

WESLEY. I thought we always had them here?

EDDIE. Shut up! (*Back to LYDIA.*) The point is, if we didn't have the meeting, then it wouldn't have gotten a number, the number being six hundred seventy-six, when in fact, since it *didn't* take place and having no number, *this* would be meeting number six hundred seventy-six.

CORA. And you wonder why nobody reads your paper.

EDDIE. Cora, are you starting now?

KATHLEEN. Lydia, any announcements...*please!*

LYDIA. Oh, yeah. The Lion's Club will be having its annual barbecue this Saturday, next to the slaughterhouse.

KATHLEEN. Just give the address.

LYDIA. Oh. That address is seventeen five Ill Wind Drive.

WESLEY. Brother, they sure knew what they were doing when they named *that* street.

CARL. It's *still* next to the slaughterhouse, though, ain't it?

KATHLEEN. Any other announcements?

LYDIA. Oh, the time of the barbecue will commence at seven thirty and tickets are (*Aghast.*) TEN DOLLARS A COUPLE!!!

CARL. I could eat all day and all night on ten dollars.

WESLEY. You probably will, too.

LYDIA. And that's...uhm, all of the announcements. (*She sits. CORA claps politely.*)

EDDIE. Stop it. (*CORA stops clapping and sniffs indignantly.*)

KATHLEEN (*to the audience*). Ladies and gentlemen, one of the reasons we're all here tonight is to try to figure out if one Jeffrey Polk died of natural causes or unnatural causes.

CORA. How could somebody die of unnatural causes?

CARL. Maybe if they was bitten by a vampire. I seen this movie last week...

KATHLEEN. May I continue? (*CARL and WESLEY get quiet.*) Toward that end, we must take on the post of being what's known as a coroner's jury, as written down in the town charter.

EDDIE (*hand raised*). Your honor?

KATHLEEN (*surprised*). Me? Oh. Mr. King, owner and editor of the *Hendricks Herald*.

EDDIE (*rises*). To be an official coroner's jury we must have the presiding physician.

KATHLEEN. We do, so *nyah!* (*She looks out in the audience.*) Doctor Bishop?

(*BISHOP rises from the audience.*)

BISHOP (*clears his throat*). He was dead. Thank you. (*He sits again.*)

CARL. Can I go now?

KATHLEEN. Doc, can you be a little more specific?

BISHOP (*rises again*). You sure you want to know? You know, this comes under the heading of a house call. Consulting fee, at least.

KATHLEEN. I'll sign the voucher, okay? Come up here. (*BISHOP makes his way to the stage, grumbling.*)

BISHOP. Another one of those town vouchers, that's just about all I need. About as worthless as you can get. That's what I get for standing up.

EDDIE (*same time as BISHOP*). Sure, go throwing away the town's money.

KATHLEEN. I suppose you'd've done it differently?

EDDIE. Have him mail it in, cost you one stamp. *No*, you had to have this stupid...

KATHLEEN. Doc? Where are you? (*BISHOP finally arrives and stands next to her.*)

BISHOP. Here, I'm right here.

KATHLEEN (*to the audience*). Now, ladies and gentlemen, what I have done here is have our drama instructor, Miss Martindale, set up a reasonable facsimile of Carl and Mattie Johansen's living room, where the deceased was found. (*She crosses to the living room set, followed by BISHOP.*) Now, Doc, where was Mr. Polk found?

BISHOP. Sitting there on the couch.

KATHLEEN. Will you show us?

BISHOP. You want me to be the body?

KATHLEEN. The late Mr. Polk.

BISHOP. And I missed "Gilligan's Island" for this. (*He sits on the L side of the couch.*) He, the deceased, was about like this when I got there. Why don't you ask Cora? She was the first one to find him.

KATHLEEN. Right. Good. Cora? (*CORA rises and moves to the living room.*)

CORA (*a bit nervous*). What is it you want me to do?

KATHLEEN. Just tell us, in your own words, what you saw when you went into the Johansen's living room?

CORA (*faces the audience*). Is this all right?

KATHLEEN. Fine, now go ahead.

CORA (*loudly*). I found the body just like that! (*She awkwardly extends an arm toward BISHOP and smiles broadly.*)

WESLEY. Brother, this is high drama, ain't it?

EDDIE. Yeah, you'd swear you were right in the same room with them.

KATHLEEN. Now, Cora, I want you to start from the beginning and tell everyone exactly what happened last Saturday, when you first met Mr. Polk.

CORA. Yes, ma'am, Your Honor, Madam Mayor.

EDDIE. Yeah, tell all three of them.

KATHLEEN. Hey! (*EDDIE throws up his hands, demonstrating that he will be quiet.*)

CORA. I remember it as if it just happened.

KATHLEEN. Two days ago.

CORA. That's right.

KATHLEEN. It did.

CORA. Oh.

KATHLEEN. Go ahead.

CORA. Well, I guess I'll skip over most of the morning, it not having anything to do with the...(*She indicates BISHOP.*)...the bod...the corp...the...Mr. Polk. Anyway, I was out in my garden, my porch garden, the one out front. You've all seen it, caladiums mostly, when I can get the dogs to leave them alone. I had to chase two of them off with a hoe just a couple of hours before. Two of the big-

gest hounds in the whole community, near as I can tell. Monk Taggert's dogs, too. (*She yells into the audience.*) Monk, pen those mongrels, won'cha?! Those things just run free as the breeze, digging up everything in their path. Lucky thing they don't live near the cemetery!

EDDIE. Glad you're skipping over all this.

KATHLEEN. Let her tell it. (*To CORA.*) Maybe you could shorten it a little. Mr. Polk, remember?

CORA. Well, I'm coming to that. See, I was out in my garden, the front garden like I said, when my accident happened.

WESLEY. Accident? What accident?

CORA. With the hoe.

WESLEY. Hoe?

KATHLEEN. You had a hoe accident?

CARL. She has them all the time.

CORA. Knocked me slap down. Anyway, I was lying there on the porch and...

KATHLEEN. I think you skipped a bit *too* much. How'd you have an accident with your hoe?

CORA. Oh, it wadn't *my* hoe. I had borrowed it from Carl. (*She looks at CARL.*) I still have your long-handled shovel, too, only thing I had to knock a dirt dauber nest off it. Don't you *ever* use it?

KATHLEEN (*anxiously*). Cora! (*She composes herself.*) What happened with the hoe?

CORA. Well, I was in my garden and I wanted to step back to get an overall view of it, you know? That's when I forgot about dragging out that hoe and stepped back right on top of the upturned blade and it came up, Katy bar the door, caught me square in the back of the head and next thing I knew I was cartwheeling and seeing stars, you know, like they always show in those old cartoons? Well,

you do! (*She takes a medium pause and looks at KATHLEEN.*) You do. Anyway, I finally come to rest, seemed like forever, those things happen almost like it's in slow motion or something, spraddled on my front porch, like a Thanksgiving turkey. That's when he come up.

KATHLEEN. Who?

CORA. Mr. Polk.

KATHLEEN. Oh, yeah. Lydia, you get all that?

LYDIA (*who's stopped writing*). Not even close.

CORA (*slowly*). I was in my garden and stepped back to get an overall...

KATHLEEN. Mr. Polk came up.

CORA. He did, for a fact. I didn't even know he was there, he didn't drive up or nothing. Anyway, just as the last galaxy was clearing outta my head, I feel this arm reach down and take my hand. Well, I look up and he helps me scoop up all my stuff and get to my feet and over to the swing. He asks me if I was all right and everything and should he run and get the doctor. Well, I didn't know, I told him he might run inside and give Doc a call. He weren't there, though.

KATHLEEN. What time was this?

CORA. I guess...eleven-fifteen, thereabouts.

KATHLEEN (*turns to BISHOP*). Where were you on Saturday morning...(*She notices that BISHOP has dozed off.*) Will you look at the man?

EDDIE. DOC!

BISHOP (*rouses himself*). Hah! What?

EDDIE. We keeping you up?

BISHOP. Heard every word. What'd she say?

KATHLEEN. Saturday morning Cora tried to call you.

CORA (*correcting her*). Mr. Polk tried to call him.

BISHOP. Nobody called me, I'd'a heard it.

WESLEY (*sarcastically*). Yeah, every word.

BISHOP. Nobody called me.

CORA. Well, that's mighty odd.

KATHLEEN. A man died in another man's living room, a *lot* of it's odd.

CORA. I suppose.

KATHLEEN. Go on.

CORA. Anyway, he come back outside, I was feeling a little more like myself and that's when he introduces himself. Says his name and how he's a county agricultural agent.

KATHLEEN. And that was about eleven-fifteen.

WESLEY (*rises mightily*). Oh, I get it now. Didn't sink in at first but it has now. This ain't no coroner's jury, this is an investigation.

KATHLEEN. Same thing, sit down.

WESLEY (*crosses to her*). You didn't like the way I handled it so you pull this out of a hat, is that about it?

KATHLEEN. All aspects of the man's death have to be researched.

WESLEY. He died of a heart attack, ain't that right, Doc?

BISHOP. Near as I can tell, didn't I say that?

EDDIE and KATHLEEN. No!

BISHOP. He died of a heart attack. Where's that voucher?

WESLEY. But we're still waiting for the autopsy results from the county, right?

BISHOP. Oh, yeah, that's right too. Mayor, should I get a voucher from them as well?

CARL. Go back to sleep, Doc.

BISHOP. You got a good couch here. Like to have it for my waiting room.

CARL. It ain't my couch, it's a reasonable facsimile.

BISHOP. Yeah? Looks like tweed.

WESLEY. Yeah, reasonable facsimile like this coroner's jury.

KATHLEEN. Will you sit down and let me continue?

CARL. Well, if you're going to do it right then you forgot a piece of furniture over there.

KATHLEEN. What?

CARL (*crosses to the chair*). Oh, I suppose it's okay enough but if you want it to look just like my house does on Saturdays then you need a knitting basket right here.

KATHLEEN. Knitting basket. (*She looks out into the audience.*) Miss Martindale? We need something like a knitting basket. Are you still here?

(*MARTINDALE enters from back stage.*)

MARTINDALE. Sorry, I was sewing up a watermelon. What did you say?

KATHLEEN. We need your help out here, if you have a minute.

MARTINDALE. What do you need?

KATHLEEN. Just another of your pieces of furniture, if you have it.

MARTINDALE. I have everything back here.

EDDIE. Wait, how can you sew up a watermelon?

MARTINDALE. Oh, it's not a real watermelon, it's for the play. (*She looks out at the audience.*) By the way, the Seniors are getting ready to do that old favorite *Papa's Got An Itch* and we open next Friday night at eight o'clock.

CORA (*crosses to MARTINDALE*). You know what you ought to do? You ought to do another show on Saturday night with the barbecue and it would be like one of those dinner theater things.

MARTINDALE. We would but we'd have to dress in the slaughterhouse. And there's no telling what goes on in there.