

DIAL M FOR MURDER

Adapted by Jeffrey Hatcher
From the original by Frederick Knott

SEPT 2 – 20



Kat Lee; by Shawn Poynter

**CLARENCE
BROWN
THEATRE**
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

STUDY GUIDE



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Clarence Brown Theatre.....	3
Attending A Performance/Expectations.....	3
About the Playwright.....	4
Synopsis.....	5
Character Breakdown.....	6
Glossary of Legal Terms.....	7
Adapting A Script.....	8
Process of Adapting A Script.....	9
Building Tension Through Writing.....	10-11
Discussion Questions.....	12
Classroom Activities.....	12-13
Adapting A Script Worksheet.....	14

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ABOUT THE CLARENCE BROWN THEATRE

The Clarence Brown Theatre Company is a professional theatre company in residence at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. Founded in 1974 by Sir Anthony Quayle and Dr. Ralph G. Allen, the company is a member of the League of Resident Theatres (LORT), the largest professional theatre association in the country. The University of Tennessee is one of a handful of universities nationwide that is affiliated with a professional LORT theatre, allowing students regular opportunities to work alongside professional actors, designers and production artists. Undergraduates, graduates, faculty, staff and visiting professional artists all work together to create high quality productions.

Our namesake comes from the famed film director Clarence Brown who widely esteemed for his contributions to film making during the transition from silent films to the “talkies”. Mr. Brown was raised in Knoxville and is a graduate of the University of Tennessee.

Our facilities consist of three spaces, the Clarence Brown Theatre our proscenium stage which seats 570, The Lab Theatre our black box space which seats around 125, and our newest space The Jenny Boyd Theatre which can be configured in arena, thrust, or proscenium configurations.

ATTENDING A **PERFORMANCE/EXPECTATIONS**

Matinees will begin at 9:30 am in the Clarence Brown Theatre at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

We ask that you arrive at the theatre by 9:00 a.m. so that students may be seated in an orderly and timely manner.

Please let us know in advance should a member of your party require accessible seating.

Student audiences are often the most rewarding audiences that an acting ensemble can face. We want every performance to be a positive experience for both audience and cast, and we ask you to familiarize your students with the theatre etiquette that follows. We encourage the students to interact with the play. Live theatre feeds off of the energy the audience brings, it's ok to laugh, clap, gasp, and have fun!

What to bring to the theatre:

- Curiosity
- Imagination
- Respect for others
- An open mind

What to leave behind:

- Food and beverages
- Conversations during the play
- Cell phones, other electronic/noise making devices
- Backpacks

In an effort to make the theatre a more welcoming space for all, please note we will have a few sensory boxes available for checkout during the duration of the performance. Please alert one of our staff members should a student benefit from one.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Frederick Knott (Playwright)

Frederick Knott (1916-2002) was an English playwright and screenplay writer. His work made major contributions to the mystery and thriller genres. *Dial M For Murder* (1952) is Knott's first and most well known work. The play saw great success on both British and American stages before being adapted into an Alfred Hitchcock film. Unlike most other playwrights, Knott was more concerned with the business of theatre rather than the art. He only wrote a few plays in his lifetime, including *Write Me A Murder* (1961) and *Wait Until Dark* (1966). Even though he had a relatively small portfolio, his plays were profitable enough for him to live a comfortable life. Despite his personal indifference towards writing, his works have had an undeniable influence on murder mystery media.



Jeffery Hatcher (Adapter)

Jeffery Hatcher (1957-) is an American playwright and screenplay writer who is known for his diverse collection of work. His writings tend to explore identity and the interaction between illusion and reality. Some of his best-known plays include *Three Viewings* (1995) and *Compleat Female Stage Beauty* (1999). Hatcher has a knack for adapting stories and has put his own spin on scripts for both the stage and the screen. Some of his credits include *Mr. Holmes* (2015), *Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde* (2008), and an adaptation of his own play titled *Stage Beauty* (2004). Hatcher adapted Frederick Knott's work *Dial M For Murder* in 2022, and refreshed the script to be better appreciated by a modern audience.



SYNOPSIS

ACT I

Dial M For Murder opens in the living room of an upscale London apartment on a September evening in 1952. Margot Wendice tells her former lover and thriller novelist, Maxine Hadley, that an incriminating letter had been stolen from her handbag. The person responsible gives Margot an ultimatum: pay five thousand pounds, or her husband learns about the women's affair. Later that evening, Tony Wendice invites a former classmate, Lesgate, to the apartment while the women are at the theatre. Tony reveals that he knows about his wife's affair and that he was responsible for blackmailing her. He explains that he only married Margot for her money and, with Lesgate's help, he will now kill her for it.

The next evening, Maxine and the Wendices discuss what makes the perfect murder. While the women are caught up in their conversation, Tony sets the stage for Lesgate to execute their plot. Tony takes Maxine to an interview about her new book, leaving Margot alone in the apartment. While she is enjoying her evening, Tony calls her on the house phone to get her into the living room where Lesgate is waiting for her. Unfortunately for the men, the "perfect murder" does not go to plan. Margot ends up killing Lesgate, but not before he reveals some information about why he was there. When Tony arrives at the scene, he secretly plants a pair of Margot's stockings on Lesgate's body in addition to the incriminating letter in hopes of framing his wife.

ACT II

Act Two begins the following morning; Maxine enters the apartment eager to check on Margot. Margot, however, accuses her of being behind the murder plot. She believes that Maxine is seeking revenge for when Margot ended their relationship. During their argument, Inspector Hubbard arrives and begins questioning the Wendices about the incident. The Inspector begins to discover some inconsistencies between Margot's answers and what appeared to have occurred. He ends up accusing Margot of murdering Lesgate in cold blood and attempting to cover it up by claiming self-defense. Margot is eventually sentenced to death, much to Tony's quiet satisfaction.

A few months after Margot's arrest, Maxine visits Tony and begins describing the plot of a new book she is working on. After some time, it is clear that she is not writing a new book and instead has figured out what Tony did. She attempts to blackmail him for half of the money that will be left to him after Margot's impending execution. Later, Margot enters the apartment and explains that she was able to escape from prison. Tony leaves to come up with a plan to get his wife out of the country. Margot and Maxine are in the middle of a tense reunion when Inspector Hubbard unexpectedly drops by. It turns out that the Inspector had been suspicious about what really occurred the night of the murder, and had been working the whole time to discover the truth. He intends to prove that Tony is actually the one responsible. In a dramatic turn of events, Tony's elaborate scheming ends with him being caught red-handed in someone else's trap.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN



MARGOT WENDICE

is a wealthy socialite who is married to Tony. She is the former lover of Maxine.



MAXINE HADLEY

is a thriller author obsessed with writing “the perfect crime.” She is the former lover of both Maxine and Tony (not at the same time).



TONY WENDICE

is married to Margot, but had many affairs during his lackluster writing career. He is Maxine’s publisher and former lover.



LESGATE is one of Tony’s friends from his school days. He is a shady character who goes by different names.



INSPECTOR HUBBARD is the lead detective on the case who won’t rest until he finds the truth.

GLOSSARY OF LEGAL TERMS

ALIBI: A legal defense in which a person accused of a crime proves they were somewhere else when it happened.

BLACKMAIL: A criminal act that involves threatening to release sensitive, damaging, or embarrassing information about someone unless they meet certain demands.

FRAME: Intentionally giving false testimony or creating and planting false evidence in order to make an innocent person appear guilty of a crime.

MOTIVE: The underlying reason or impulse to commit a crime. Often used to explain why someone may have committed the act.

PREMEDITATED: A legal term to describe a crime that was planned before being carried out. This distinguishes crimes of intention (planned) from crimes of passion (impulsive).

RED-HERRING: An irrelevant fact or issue presented in legal proceedings in order to mislead or distract from the core issues of a case.

SELF-DEFENSE: A legal defense used to demonstrate that harming another person was justified. Generally, the defendant must prove that the aggressor posed a direct and imminent threat to their safety.

TESTIMONY: A formal, verbal, or written statement given by a witness under oath that serves as a form of evidence during legal proceedings.

THRILLER: Stories that are fast-paced and designed to keep audiences on the edge of their seats until the conflict resolves.

WITNESS: An individual who provides sworn testimony in a proceeding based on personal observation or expertise.

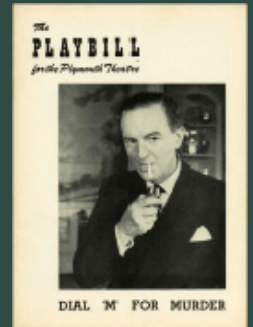
ADAPTING A SCRIPT

The Journey of Dial M

The story told in *Dial M For Murder* has gone through many different formats and adaptations over the years. The story saw great success across its various versions and reached audiences around the world.

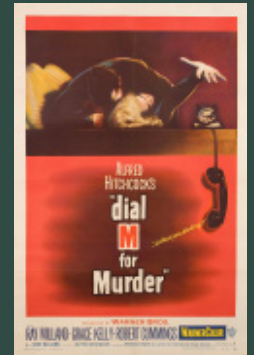
1. Frederick Knott's Original Play

Dial M For Murder first opened at the Westminster Theatre in London in June 1952. The play was an overwhelming success and quickly transferred to Broadway, where it opened at the Plymouth Theatre in October of the same year. *Dial M For Murder* was a hit with American audiences, and John Williams won a Tony Award for his performance as Inspector Hubbard. The play ran on Broadway until February 1954.



2. Alfred Hitchcock's Adaptation

Following the success of the play, Alfred Hitchcock decided to direct a movie adaptation in 1954. Frederick Knott himself adapted his script into the screenplay. This resulted in the film being such a faithful adaptation of the play that some critics remarked how the movie felt more like a “filmed play” than a movie. The film received positive reviews, and is often referred to as a masterclass in composition and how to build suspense. It was notably filmed in 3D in order to add depth to the apartment, although most audiences were only able to view it in 2D at the time.



3. A Perfect Murder

Andrew Davis's *A Perfect Murder* premiered in June 1998. This film was a loose remake of Alfred Hitchcock's *Dial M For Murder*. It saw great box office success, but received mixed reviews. Audiences said that it was beautifully shot and was good at building suspense. However, some felt that this adaptation was unnecessary and failed to build upon the work done by Hitchcock and Knott.



4. Modern Stage Adaptations

There have been multiple modern stage adaptations of the original *Dial M For Murder* with playwrights adding their own twists in order to keep the story feeling fresh. The most well-known of these adaptations is Jeffery Hatcher's version. The most notable change in this adaptation is the change of Margot's love interest from “Max” to “Maxine,” adding a new layer of complication and tension to the narrative.

THE PROCESS OF ADAPTING A SCRIPT

When adapting a story to be told through different mediums, there are many steps to go through and things to keep in mind. One of the first tasks in adapting a script for a different medium is deciding what parts of the text are essential to telling the story. The writers discuss elements such as theme, tone, and the overall message. They decide what parts of the plot can be changed without taking away from the heart of the story. Writers also decide if there are any changes that can be made to expand upon what was already written. This may mean diving deeper into a certain plot point. When adapting an older piece, they often work to include new voices and perspectives that represent the modern stage.



Grace Kelly with Alfred Hitchcock

Stories in theatre and film are often structured differently. One example of this is how scenes are broken up. Film tends to break down each story beat into its own scene. This results in films being made of many short scenes that often jump from place to place quickly. This also allows them to follow individual characters' activities in addition to the main action and setting. When adapting a story into a screenplay, the writers must take this format into consideration. This allows them to break up the plot accordingly as well as make any changes necessary to make it flow smoothly. This often involves adding or expanding upon side characters and their adventures. These changes do come at a cost and can result in the main storyline being shortened to allow for these new perspectives. In theatre, however, scenes tend to include multiple story beats. They are often broken up by location, time, or sections of major action. This means that scenes on the stage tend to be longer and are able to address multiple characters at once. This allows the play to explore the main conflict more in depth. This depth often means that there is not time to dive into subplots or the development of side characters.

Theatre and film do share many similarities, including the fact that they are both very visual mediums. They rely heavily on action to tell the story. This is useful because there are certain human actions and emotions that are hard for words to capture. When we see people go through something right in front of us, it is easier for us to empathize with them. Writers must keep this connection in mind when adapting a script. Many people would find a show boring if there are no characters they can relate to or care about.

BUILDING TENSION THROUGH WRITING

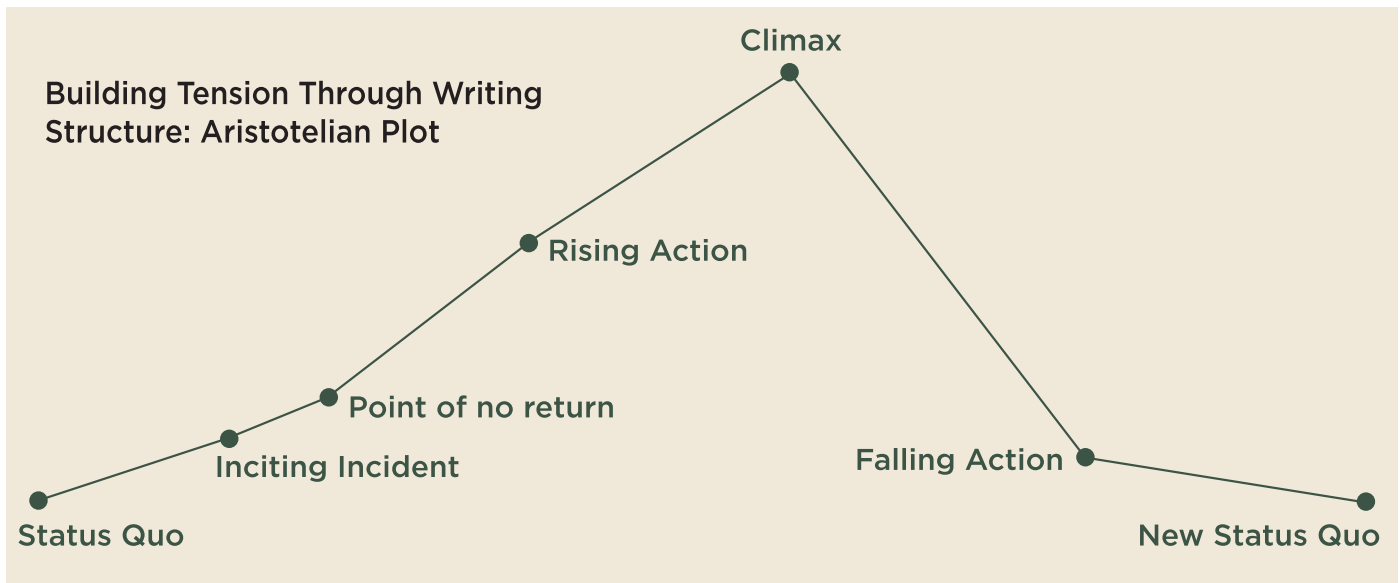
Structure: Aristotelian Plot

Aristotle was a great poet who lived in ancient Greece from 384-322 BC whose teachings have been used as a basis for many forms of storytelling for centuries. His book *Poetics* taught that all forms of poetry are imitations (or mimesis) of human action and life. He used plot as a way to organize these actions into a story. Aristotle believed that a plot must include believable action, a clear cause and effect, and follow a logical progression. Because the story is logical and has an effect, the audience is able to expect that actions will have consequences. He also taught that a story must have risk and weight in order for it to be interesting. Aristotle does this in several ways, including peripeteia and anagnorisis. Peripeteia (or reversal) is also known as a “plot-twist” that often changes what a character thought was true. This is designed to keep audiences engaged and guessing what comes next. Anagnorisis (or discovery) is the idea that in order to resolve the crisis, the characters must learn a new truth about either themselves, someone else, or the world around them.

Aristotle divided the story into a clear beginning, middle, and end. Since his time, these ideas have been expanded into a more detailed “formula” for plot. Today, we are generally able to map the plot using the following categories:

1. **Status Quo:** The set-up that establishes the world of the story and what “normal” life looks like for characters. Also known as exposition.
2. **Inciting Incident:** The event that upsets the status quo and creates the conflict of the story. This is typically an external event that happens to the character.
3. **Point of no return:** The point where the protagonist has committed to the main goal, and returning to their old life is impossible. This is the end of the set-up, and transitions the character into the action of the conflict.
4. **Rising Action:** The series of events in a story that build tension, raise the stakes, and introduce obstacles for the protagonist. This is also where much of the character development takes place.
5. **Climax:** The highest point of tension, emotional stakes, and action in the story. This is the ultimate challenge the protagonist must face and often occurs when they have the most to lose.
6. **Falling Action:** The series of events that take place immediately after the climax and de-escalate the action. This is often where the consequences of the conflict are felt.
7. **New Status Quo:** The end of the story where the characters’ new “normal” is established. Loose ends are tied up and solidifies the themes of the story.

BUILDING TENSION THROUGH WRITING



Literary Devices: Dramatic Irony

Dramatic irony is a literary device that refers to when the audience knows something that the characters do not. This works especially well in mediums like theatre and film where the audience can watch events unfold in scenes that a character is not present in. Because these scenes reveal a truth to the audience that the character does not receive, they know the person is acting on incomplete information. An example of this can be found at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* when Romeo believes that Juliet has poisoned herself. However, the audience knows that she drank sleeping medicine, not poison. Even though Romeo's actions are reasonable to him, they seem absurd to the audience because they know the truth. Dramatic irony also helps build anticipation because the audience knows what happens next, but has no choice but to watch as the characters continue towards their fate. In *Dial M For Murder*, this is demonstrated through several different scenes that the audience sees, including the actual murder scene.

Live Theatre and Connection

Theatre has a unique ability to raise the stakes and build suspense because it is live. The action unfolding on stage happens right in front of the audience. This creates a heightened sense of risk because the audience knows they are watching people tell the story in real-time. What they are seeing is the only time the play will be performed in that specific way. This creates opportunity for some theatre magic, but also the occasional mistake! This inherent risk of mistake keeps the audience on the edge of their seats, wondering what will happen not only to the characters, but the performers as well. The audience's close proximity to the play also allows them to connect with the characters on a deeper level. When we care about a character, we tend to be more invested in the outcome of their story.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW:

1. Is there such a thing as “the perfect crime”?
2. Why do you think there is so much media surrounding thriller and true crime narratives?

POST-SHOW:

1. How does seeing a play onstage differ from reading it? How does seeing a play live help or hinder the story?
2. What technical elements (costumes, lighting, etc) are most effective in telling the story? Were there any elements that took away from it?
3. Think about the plot structure of *Dial M For Murder*. In what ways does this structure add to the suspense of the story?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

PITCH A MOVIE ADAPTATION:

For this activity, students will pretend that they are the creative team for a new stage adaptation. They will work together to pick a movie, come up with suggestions for how to adapt the film, and present their pitch to a team of “producers” (their fellow classmates).

1. Separate students into groups and have each group pick a movie to adapt.*
2. Have the groups work through the worksheet provided to create their pitch. Set a time limit for the groups to do this; time is money after all! Make sure they know that their answers do not have to be perfect, but they should be well thought out. If time allows, have them make a slideshow to present their answers.
3. Once they are finished, have each group take turns presenting their pitch to the producers. While listening to other groups, have students fill out Part 2 of the worksheet. After a group finishes, you may wish to allow time for a brief “feedback session” where the producers can comment on the pitch. Constructive feedback is an essential part of the creative process!

*Note: If you only have a short amount of time or a small group of students, have them work as one big group and only work on one movie.

PLAY A GAME OF MAFIA

1. Begin by arranging students into a circle facing each other. Sort the students into the roles of “Mafia” and “detective” and “towns-person.”
You can pick the roles by using a deck of cards, or by tapping on shoulders while the group has their eyes closed. Students must NOT share what roles they are assigned. The breakdown for these roles are:
 - a. Mafia: Aces. Responsible for deciding who should “die” each round. (1-3 people depending on the size of the group)
 - b. Detective: Kings. Able to make 1 guess per round at who the Mafia are. They may use this information in discussions, but must not reveal how they obtained it. (1 -2 per game)
 - c. Townspeople: All other cards. Their goal is to survive and root out the mafia members.
2. Once roles are assigned, have the group close their eyes for “nighttime.” First, ask the mafia to open their eyes, and have them point to the person they want to “murder.” The decision must be unanimous. If they can’t come to a timely decision, they may miss their opportunity to make a move that round. Have them close their eyes once done. Next, have the Detective point to a person who they want to learn the identity of. Once you have confirmed or denied their guess, have all students open their eyes.
3. Tell the students who the Mafia chose to “murder” the night before. Have them discuss who may have been responsible.* After they have deliberated for a time, have them close their eyes and take a vote. Whoever receives the most votes is outcast from the village and becomes a silent observer of the game. If there is a tie, you may choose to either vote again or skip casting someone out this round. Once voting is over, the round is done and the players must close their eyes for another night.
4. Repeat the last two steps for as many rounds as it takes for someone to win. The Mafia wins when the number of townspeople and/or detectives is equal to or less than the number of Mafia players. The townspeople and detectives win when all Mafia have been discovered and cast out.

*Note: To help move the game along, consider setting a time limit for students to deliberate before the voting phase (2-3 minutes, or however long works for your group). Alternatively, you may set a limit on the number of rounds the students have before the Mafia automatically wins.

ADAPTING A SCRIPT WORKSHEET

Part 1: Putting Together A Pitch

Your group is the creative team of a new stage adaptation of a popular movie. A group of producers has asked to meet with you to discuss your idea. Your job is to put together a pitch to convince them that investing in your movie is the right choice. Use the following questions to guide your presentation:

1. What movie did you pick and why do you think it would make a good stage production?
2. Think about the main conflict of your story. What moments in the movie are essential to telling it. Are there any points that you would like to expand upon?
3. What is the central theme and overall tone of your movie? What are some ways you can make sure those are clear to your new audience?
4. Think about the action in your movie. Are there any moments that may need to be adjusted for the stage (flying, magic, etc.)? How do you think these changes could be achieved?

Part 2: Presenting to Producers

Congratulations! You've successfully put together a pitch, and now it's time to present. Each group will take turns presenting while everyone else acts as a Producer. While listening to your classmates' presentations, consider the following questions:

1. What is one change that adds to the existing story?
2. What is one change that takes away from the original?
3. Think about the kinds of changes that each group made. What are some similarities and differences between them?
4. Are there any ways someone adapted their movie that you would consider adding to your adaptation if you had more time?

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