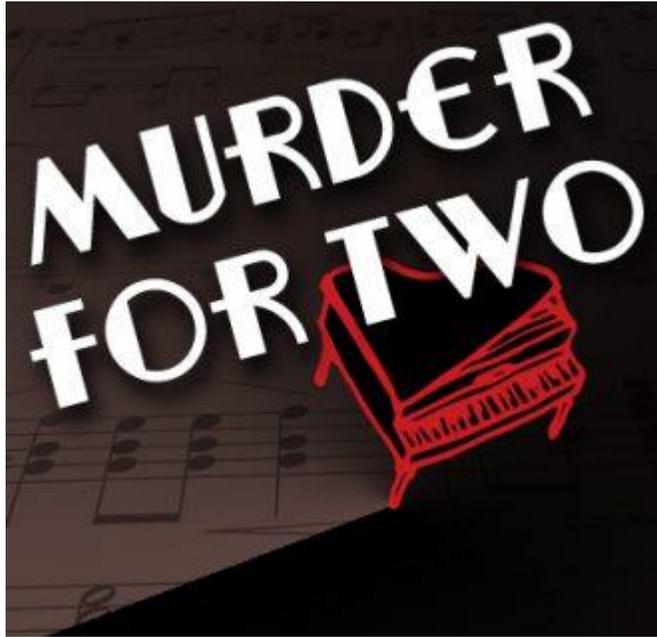


# **Sacramento Theatre Company**

## **Study Guide**



## **Murder for Two**

Book and Lyrics by Kellen Blair  
Book and Music by Joe Kinosian

**Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles**

# **Sacramento Theatre Company**

## **Mission Statement**

The Sacramento Theatre Company (STC) strives to be the leader in integrating professional theatre with theatre arts education. STC produces engaging professional theatre, provides exceptional theatre training, and uses theatre as a tool for educational engagement.

## **Our History**

The theatre was originally formed as the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre in 1942, an ad hoc troupe formed to entertain locally-stationed troops during World War II. On October 18, 1949, the Sacramento Civic Repertory Theatre acquired a space of its own with the opening of the Eaglet Theatre, named in honor of the Eagle, a Gold Rush-era theatre built largely of canvas that had stood on the city's riverfront in the 1850s. The Eaglet Theatre eventually became the Main Stage of the not-for-profit Sacramento Theatre Company, which evolved from a community theatre to professional theatre company in the 1980s. Now producing shows in three performance spaces, it is the oldest theatre company in Sacramento.

After five decades of use, the Main Stage was renovated as part of the H Street Theatre Complex Project. Features now include an expanded and modernized lobby and a Cabaret Stage for special performances. The facility also added expanded dressing rooms, laundry capabilities, and other equipment allowing the transformation of these performance spaces, used nine months of the year by STC, into backstage and administration places for three months each summer to be used by California Musical Theatre for Music Circus.

Sacramento Theatre Company can accommodate 292 patrons in the proscenium-style auditorium of its Main Stage, while the Pollock Stage offers a more intimate experience with only 87 seats in a black box-style theatre. Both provide good acoustics and sight-lines. This professional, Equity theatre presents seven professional productions per season with a reputation for excellent stage adaptations of classic literature. Three annual productions in the Cabaret Stage, which seats 100, round out the experience with high-quality Broadway musical revues.

The Young Professionals Conservatory, a training program for young theatre artists, was founded in 2003. The program, as well as the entire STC School of the Arts, is directed by Michele Hillen-Noufer.

**For further information about the Sacramento Theatre Company please visit us online:**

**<http://www.sactheatre.org>**

# Murder for Two

## Sacramento Theatre Company Production Study Guide

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\*written for the Sacramento Theatre Company by Anna Miles

**Study Guide Materials Compiled by Anna Miles**

## About the Writers: *Murder for Two*

### **Kellen Blair** (Book and Lyrics)

Kellen Blair was nominated for a Drama Desk award as co-creator of *Murder For Two*, which premiered at Chicago Shakespeare and went on to perform Off-Broadway at Second Stage Theatre and New World Stages, and which is currently touring internationally in Tokyo, Shanghai, Buenos Aires, and the UK. He also won a Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Musical Work in 2011 along with co-writer Joe Kinosian. Blair's other work includes the lyrics for *Scrooge in Love*, which performed at 42nd Street Moon, and for which he won the 2015 Bay Area Critics Award for Best Score.

### **Joe Kinosian** (Book and Music)

Joe Kinosian is the recipient of the Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Musical along with Kellen Blair. As a performer, Joe has appeared in *Dirty Blonde* at Hangar Theater, and the NYC premiere of *Dear Edwina* Off-Broadway.

### **Partnership**

Kinosian and Blair met while both attending the BMI Musical Theatre Writing Workshop in 2008 and have enjoyed a collaborative relationship ever since. Their first partnership resulted in *Murder for Two* and a joint Joseph Jefferson Award. They have had their work performed both on Broadway and at the Kennedy Center, and are the recipients of the 2013 ASCAP Foundation Mary Rodgers/Lorenz Hart Award. They are currently developing other musicals, including *The More Things Change*, a backstage musical comedy about two middle aged actors.

## Synopsis: *Murder for Two*

Dahlia Whitney is planning a surprise party for her husband, the famous novelist Arthur Whitney. In attendance are Murray and Barb Flandon, the Whitney's bickering middle-aged neighbors; Steph Whitney, the Whitney's niece who also happens to be earning a graduate degree in criminology; Barrette Lewis, a famous ballerina; Dr. Griff, a prolific psychologist; and Timmy, Yonkers, and Skid, the last three remaining members of an all-boys choir (*Prelude/Waiting in the Dark*). But when Dahlia turns the lights out to poise everyone for a surprise, gunshots ring out, and the lights turn on to reveal Arthur, lying dead on the ground. But who was the murderer?

And so arrives Officer Marcus Moscovitz, with another unseen officer, Lou. Marcus is recovering from a mysterious trauma with his former partner/lover Vanessa, and is looking forward to proving to his chief that he deserves to be promoted to detective due to his knowledge of proper crime scene protocol (*Protocol Says*). While the real detective on the case, Detective Grayson, rushes to drive an hour to get to the scene, Dahlia believes Marcus to be the detective (*Protocol Says Reprise*), and Marcus decides to let Dahlia believe this and swears to solve the crime before Detective Grayson arrives.

Marcus begins by questioning Dahlia, who reveals that she has become resentful of her husband in recent years (*A Perfectly Lovely Surprise*). He next interrogates Dr. Griff, who appears to be treating everyone in the room, and who harbors an intense obsession with Officer Marcus. Marcus, in the meantime, begins to develop an obsession of his own, with ballerina Barrette, and attempts to talk to her (*So...*). He is interrupted, however, by Steph, who is determined to help Marcus crack the case. Murray then accuses his wife Barb of committing the murder (*It Was Her*), which causes Marcus to realize that Arthur had written unfavorably about every guest, which therefore gave every guest a motive. We learn that even Marcus himself has been turned into a novel by the late Arthur Whitney- a novel about the scandal involving Marcus' former partner/lover, Vanessa. After talking to three members of an all-boys choir (*A Lot Woise*), Marcus decides that whoever murdered Arthur must be featured prominently in his unpublished novel, "All of Them Bananas!" Marcus sets out to search for Mr. Whitney's notebook, but finds it is stolen.

Marcus finally gets Barrette alone, and Steph muses from the other room that Marcus needs a partner to help him solve his crimes (*He Needs a Partner*). Marcus reminds himself not to get too seduced by Barrette's beauty, as he had previously with Vanessa. After questioning Barrette, (*So What If I Did?*), Marcus realizes that she isn't the innocent woman he had imagined her to be, and even learns that Barrette is the one who stole Mr. Whitney's notebook, for fear he would reveal their secret affair in his next novel.

When Marcus retrieves the notebook and looks inside, he learns that Dr. Griff had been selling his patients' secrets to Mr. Whitney in exchange for a favorable depiction in the author's novels. In the heat of the moment, Dr. Griff also reveals that one of those patients expressed an intention to kill Arthur. The psychiatrist is just about to expose this person via a friendship song sung with Marcus (*A Friend Like You*), but dies from poisoned tea before he can (*A Friend Like You Reprise*). Marcus now must solve two murders, and discover who poisoned the tea. He sends the three choir boys out with Officer Lou, and the boys tell Marcus to "whistle" if he should ever need their help.

Just then, Henry Vivaldi, a firefighter and late comer to the party, arrives- however, because he has never been a patient of Dr. Griff's, he is immediately cleared of suspicion; and

because Marcus was a patient of Dr. Griff's, Steph points out that he is as much of a suspect as any of the rest of them. Marcus leads the guests in the next step of crime scene protocol- reenacting the events of the crime (*Process of Elimination*). When this last step does not help Marcus solve the crime, he shamefully admits to the party guests that he is not the real detective. Steph, however, has solved the mystery- but who does she reveal to be the killer? Does Marcus become a real detective, and does he bring Steph on as his partner? Well...you'll just have to wait and see!

## **Characters: *Murder for Two***

One of the unique qualities about the show is in its casting. In *Murder for Two*, two actors play all of the characters, while accompanying themselves on the piano.

**Actor One** portrays:

**Marcus Moscowicz**- an ambitious young police officer with dreams of becoming a detective, and who struggles to overcome a difficult past involving his mysterious former partner/lover, Vanessa

Voices of **The Chief** (Marcus' boss) and **Vanessa** (the aforementioned former partner/love) in a flashback

**Actor Two** portrays all of the murder suspects, including:

**Dahlia Whitney**- former actress and singer, and wife to the murder victim, novelist Arthur Whitney

**Murray and Barb Flandon**- a bickering middle aged married couple, neighbors to the Whitneys

**Steph Whitney**- Niece to Dahlia and the murdered Arthur Whitney; an overeager grad student obtaining her degree in criminology with a propensity for asking questions.

**Barrette Lewis**- A famous, beautiful ballerina.

**Dr. Griff**- a kindly psychiatrist with a prolific client list

**Timmy, Yonkers, and Skid**- Strangely old-timey members of a little boys' choir

**Henry Vivaldi**- a fire fighter, and a late arrival to the party

**Other Characters:**

**Officer Lou**- An unseen conversation partner for Marcus and several suspects

# The History of the Murder Mystery

By Anna Miles

The “Murder Mystery” genre, also known as the “Whodunit” genre, has been a staple of American entertainment since at least the invention of the classic board game “Clue” in 1949. The formula has become so familiar that it could indeed be considered a part of the collective pop culture psyche- when the lights come up to reveal Arthur Whitney’s body amongst a room full of party guests, the audience knows what comes next: the clues will be presented, and the mystery will unfold, and eventually be solved.

But this narrative wasn’t always so recognizable- in fact, it didn’t even always exist. Humankind has always been intrigued and entertained by murder and by mystery, which has been reflected in its art across centuries and even millennia. Most of the Ancient Greek plays featured murders as their primary plot points, and *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* includes its own kind of murder mystery in the story “The Three Apples,” in which a vizier must solve a murder in only three days. But the murder mystery stories we know of today - specifically the formula known as “the locked room,” in which a murder victim is discovered inside a sealed space, with no possibility of entry or exit before or after the murder occurs, and the detective’s challenge is to discover who within the room committed the murder, as well as “how” and “why” - didn’t come about until much later.

The modern mystery form traces its roots back to the Industrial Revolution in England; during the mid and late 1800s, literacy rates rose combined with more general leisure time amongst the lower and middle classes, books and reading began to be viewed as a form of entertainment, rather than a mode of education reserved for only the wealthier classes, as it had been regarded in previous generations. As authors began to write more entertaining storylines, the murder mystery genre took its earliest steps. Contributors included writers Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins with works such as Dickens’ unfinished manuscript, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), which concerned a mysterious disappearance and a tangle of illicit love affairs. Collins wrote several crime novels and short stories, including *The Woman in White* in 1860 and *The Moonstone* in 1868, which is considered by many to be the first ever English detective novel. Anna Katherine Green became the first woman to write a detective novel in 1878 with her book *The Leavenworth Case*.

But while these authors contributed to the development of the form, Edgar Allen Poe is considered to be the true Father of the Murder Mystery. Poe introduced the first fictional detective, Auguste D. Dupin, in his 1841 story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which is also considered the first and most famous example of the “locked room” style. Poe is considered the first writer to focus more on the intellectual fascinations of a crime scene, rather than on the spooky tonal aesthetics- Crime Classics describes this a shift from “a focus on the superficial trappings of series setting and shocking event to a study of the criminal’s mind.”

In 1887, the publication of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* introduced the famous detective Sherlock Holmes to the mystery fans of the world. Sherlock Holmes’ sharp intelligence turned to solving of crimes into a science, further solidifying the developing mystery formula.

The mystery genre blossomed and assumed its full potential during the 1920s, an era considered to be the “Golden Age” of mystery fiction. During this period, the genre crossed the pond and became a sensation in the United States as well as continuing to be popular in the UK. The most notable writer from this period is author Agatha Christie- Christie wrote more than 80

novels over the span of a 50-plus year career. Her prolific contributions to the murder mystery solidified the genre's place as a pivotal part of the English and American cultural zeitgeists, and helped the murder mystery become recognizable enough for two young composers to write a 2011 parody musical based on the form- knowing that they could rely on their audiences to expect the clues to be presented and the mystery to be solved once those lights came up on the body of Arthur Whitney.

# What is "Parody"?

By Anna Miles

Merriam-Webster defines "parody" as "a literary or musical work in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule"; in other words, a "parody piece," whether that piece is a song, a movie, a TV show, a book, or, in this case, a musical stage play, exaggerates a well-known style with humor as the goal- and often with the intention of poking fun at the subject matter.

You may have heard of such popular contemporary parodies (also known spoofs, send-ups, caricatures, or farces) as *Scary Movie* and its sequels, which mock the horror movie genre, or the music of Weird Al Yankovich. Mel Brooks made an entire career of making film parodies: his canon includes *Blazing Saddles* (a parody of western films), *Young Frankenstein* (a spoof of *Frankenstein*), *Spaceballs* (parodying *Star Wars*), and *Robin Hood Men in Tights* (a comedic version of the classic "Robin Hood" tale).

These examples are all very different from each other: watch *Blazing Saddles*, and you will experience older jokes, many of which seem much more at home in 1974 than in 2017. *Scary Movie*, on the other hand, reads as much more modern. And if you listen to a Weird Al album from the 90s, you will hear very different styles of music imitated than you would hear in a Weird Al album from 2015. But these differences are also what makes these works similar to each other: a good parody exploits the shared cultural icons, images, and history of the time and place in which it is made. Parody, while intended primarily to make its audience laugh, often aims to provide some kind of larger commentary. But while satire, parody's distant cousin, ridicules familiar genres and cultural touchstones with the intention of engaging in social or political criticism, parody comments on the genre itself, and on how we, as the audience, consume a well-known genre. A parody takes what is familiar and subverts it- it uses an audience's expectations and flips them on their head, so that the audience sees not only the parodied genre in a new way, but also themselves and the way they receive information.

John Gross, author of the *Oxford Book of Parodies*, argues that parody most often flourishes on territory somewhere between *pastiche* ("a composition in another artist's manner, without satirical intent") and *burlesque* (which "fools around with the material of high literature and adapts it to low ends"). *Murder for Two* does exactly this: it exploits our perceptions of the murder mystery genre as "low brow" and "melodramatic" entertainment just enough to call attention to the genre's absurdities while simultaneously critiquing the ways in which we place value judgments upon popular forms of entertainment and celebrating the things we love about those forms.

So, now that you know more about parody- what exactly do you think *Murder for Two* has to say about the murder mystery genre and the way we watch it?

## **Activity: Write your own murder mystery!**

To explore the “murder mystery” genre a little further, use this step by step guide to create your own murder mystery!

### **Step 1: Choose your FORM**

How do you want to tell your mystery story? You could tell it in:

A play or musical, like *Murder for Two*

A narrative short story to be read

An interactive game, like *Clue*

A song

A poem

Or anything else you can dream up?

### **Step 2: Choose your SETTING**

Where will the murder, and the solving of that murder, take place?

An old mansion?

A school auditorium?

A grocery store?

### **Step 3: Choose your CHARACTERS**

In order to have a complete story, you will need to choose:

1.) A victim

2.) A detective (it doesn't have to be a literal police detective- just the person who will examine the clues to solve the crime! If you have chosen to make an interactive game, the detective will be the person or people playing the game)

3.) The Suspects- one of whom will be the murderer! Decide how each of the suspects relates to the victim and to each other.

### **Step 4: Choose a MOTIVE**

Why would each suspect, especially the actual murderer, want to kill the victim? For example, in *Murder for Two*, the suspects all have a motive to kill the victim, because he has written about each of them in his novels.

### **Step 5: Choose a WEAPON**

How, and with what, does the murderer kill the victim?

### **Step 6: Choose a SCENARIO**

Why would each suspect, and the victim, be in this setting together? If your detective is not a traditional police detective, how and why do they enter the scene, and why do they want to solve the crime? For example, in *Murder for Two*, the characters are all attending a surprise birthday party for the victim. How does the murderer at first go undetected? Is it because it occurs in the dark, like it does in *Murder for Two*, or for some other reason?

# Study Guide Questions: Engage With the Play

By Anna Miles

Take charge of your theatre-going experience and make it your own by asking yourself questions before, during, and after watching a play.

## Questions to ask before the play:

If you **HAVE** read the play:

How did you envision the set, or the visual world of the play, while reading?

How did you imagine the characters looked while reading the play?

What themes did you notice repeating throughout the play?

What images jumped out at you while reading the play?

How would you describe the central theme of the play in one sentence?

If you **HAVEN'T** read the play:

Do you know anything about the play? If so, what do you know?

In General:

When you think about "theatre," what impressions come to mind? What does "theatre" mean to you?

What do you expect your experience to be when you watch a play? Do you expect to be bored? Excited? Engaged? Curious? Angry? Tired?

## Questions to ask after the play:

If you **READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT**:

How did the production set differ from what you had imagined while reading the play? How was it similar? How did these changes affect your understanding of the story?

Did the characters look different from how you envisioned them looking while reading the play? Did they sound different? Act differently? How did these changes affect your understanding and

opinion of each character? How did these changes affect your understanding of the overall story?

How did the themes and images you noticed while reading translate to performance? Did the same themes and images jump out at you? Did you notice new ones?

Did this particular production seem to have the same central theme, or a different central theme from the one you discovered while reading? What elements of the staging, acting, or design helped convey the theme?

Did they play gain or lose anything in performance? Did you enjoy reading it more, or watching it?

If you **DIDN'T READ THE PLAY BEFORE SEEING IT:**

How did the play live up to your expectations? Did it turn out the way you thought it would? Was your knowledge of the play correct?

Were you able to follow the story?

Which part of the story did you most respond to? What themes and images jumped out at you?

Which character did you most relate to? Why?

In General:

How did this production change or confirm your original impressions of "theatre"?

How did your experience watching the play differ from how you expected it would go?

In your own words, how would you summarize the plot of the play? How is the plot different from the story, or the thematic implications, in the play?

Did you feel the story was relevant to your life? How and why?

Did you feel the story said something about our society, or about the world at large? If so, what?

Do you feel this story is an important one to tell and keep telling? How and why?

What kind of stories do you most respond to?

# Theatre Etiquette

- Arrive at the theater on time.
- Visit the restroom before the performance begins.
- Turn off your cell phone. Do not speak on the phone or text during the performance.
- Pay attention to announcements that are made prior to the show about the rules of the theater you are attending and the location of the fire exits.
- Don't speak during the performance unless you are encouraged by the performers to participate.
- Remember that the Overture (introductory music) in musical theater is part of the performance, so be quiet when it begins.
- Do not take pictures during the performance. It can be very distracting to the actors and can cause a mishap. It can also be a violation of an actor's contract.
- Remain in your seat for the entire performance. If you must leave, exit during intermission. In an emergency, wait for an appropriate break in the show. It is rude to get up in the middle of a quiet moment.
- Do not eat or drink in the theater.
- Do not put your feet up on the seats or balcony and do not kick the seat in front of you.
- Don't put or throw anything on the stage.
- Do laugh when the performance is funny.
- Do applaud when it is appropriate during the performance.
- Do applaud when the performance is over... this tells the performers and crew that you appreciate their work.
- Stand and applaud if you really thought the show was great (a standing ovation).
- Do not whistle, stomp your feet, or scream out to the performers except for a Bravo or Brava.

## **Additional Resources**

***Murder for Two: The Musical***

<http://murderfortwomusical.com/>

***The Complete History of the Mystery***

<https://www.talesofmurder.com/murderwiki/complete-history-of-the-mystery/>

***History of the Mystery***

<http://www.mysterynet.com/timeline/history-of-mystery/>

***A Brief History of the Mystery Novel***

<https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/a-brief-history-of-the-mystery-novel>