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SF PERUSALS

Strictly Murder

A Play

Brian Clemens

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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STRICTLY MURDER

First presented at the Mill at Sonning Theatre on 21st February 2006 with the following cast:

Josef	Jeffrey Perry
Peter Meredith	Nick Waring
Suzy Hinchcliffe	Maxine Gregory
Ross	Giles Watling
Miriam Miller	Clare Hatfield

Directed by Sally Hughes
Set designed by Jacqueline Hutson
Costumes designed by Jane Kidd
Lighting designed by Matthew Biss

CHARACTERS

Josef, middle-aged
Peter Meredith, 30-49
Suzy Hinchcliffe, young
Ross
Miriam Miller

Male Voice off stage (may be played by Ross)
Pre-recorded voices of British and German **Radio Announcers**

Note: when the German Radio Announcer speaks, licence should be taken so as to emphasise words vital for interpretation: i.e. "Hitler", "Reich", "Reichte des Vaterlands", "Der Führer". Recording of an Adolf Hitler speech can be obtained from BBC Radio for a small fee or from the Old Time Radio website: www.OTRCAT.com

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

The action of the play takes place in a rustic cottage in a valley in Provence, France.

Time — 1939

ACT I

Scene 1 Early morning in April
Scene 2 Later that day
Scene 3 Some time later

ACT II

Scene 1 Morning. Five months later
Scene 2 Early evening. Later that day
Scene 3 That night

This play is dedicated to
my darling wife Janet
and our talented sons, George and Sam

Other plays by Brian Clemens
published by Samuel French Ltd:

Anybody for Murder? (*with Dennis Spooner*)
The Devil at Midnight
Edge of Darkness
Inside Job
Shock!
A Sting in the Tale (*with Dennis Spooner*)
Will You Still Love Me in the Morning? (*with Dennis Spooner*)

ACT I

SCENE 1

A rural, stone built cottage situated in a valley in Provence. Dawn. April 1939

The set consists, in the main, of a kitchen/living area, where almost all social activity takes place

A stable door, in two halves, leads directly in from outside. Elsewhere an internal door or archway leads to all other areas of the cottage, including the rear

There is a largish window US, *with practical sink, stove and cupboards beneath. The view through the window gives an impression of open country with trees beyond. Above or adjacent to the window is a bulkhead shelf where wine is stored. Near the sink is a waste bin. There is a small, rough hewn table* DS, *with a couple of wooden chairs. On the table is a bowl of fruit. Elsewhere in the area is a beaten-up old sofa with a few magazines and papers on it. Near the stable door is a free-standing hatstand that can barely be seen because, over time, it has accumulated a mound of coats, hats, scarves, etc. At its feet are Wellington boots, some with walking sticks or umbrellas stuck in them*

There are a few pictures on the walls, all by the same artist and predominately of red poppies. Elsewhere some canvases are stacked against a wall. On the floor is a rough, woven rug that has seen better days. Somewhere in the area is an electric wireless of the period. There is electric light, but also an oil lamp for emergency lighting

As the CURTAIN *rises it is still fairly dark, and the silence is profound. Somewhere, far off, a cock crows*

A long moment. The top half of the stable door opens and Josef is revealed. His age is difficult to determine, he might be as young as 40, or as old as 60. There is a stoop of pain about him, he is shabbily dressed in "farmer's clothes" and, as we shall see, he is not mentally "normal", he can be almost childlike in his behaviour. Across one shoulder is slung a worn canvas bag.

He carries a shotgun or rifle. His movements are furtive and wary as he leans in, gently unbolts the lower half of the door, and enters

He moves deeper into the area, collides with a chair, freezes, looks around, then moves to open and delve into a cupboard. It is too dim to see, so he moves to switch on the lights, then homes in on a chunk of bread near the sink, bites into it, then notices the apples in the fruit bowl, grabs two, admires them, polishes them, slips them into his bag

With a squawk of sound, the wireless, being in tandem with the Lights, warms up and comes on. Josef swings his gun round towards the wireless in alarm. The radio signal is intermittent; French music of the period plays, but occasionally the station is lost and static intervenes. Josef stares at the wireless, then relaxes and carries on his search for food. He finds some grapes and pops some into his mouth, finds a can and pops it into his bag

Peter (*off*) Suzy?

Josef reacts, quickly moves to exit through the stable door, pulling it closed behind him

Peter Meredith enters through the internal door. He could be anything between 30 and 49, an attractive man with a face that is either cruel or has suffered. He is in stockinged feet, trousers, vest, and is just putting on a shirt

Suzy?

He seems surprised to find the place empty. He moves to the wireless, to adjust it to a clearer signal, until some classical music plays. This done, he now delves into cupboards to find cheese which, with the bread, he begins to assemble into an austere breakfast. He puts the kettle on to make coffee

The Lights suddenly flicker, dim, then go out altogether. The wireless stops too

Bloody thing! (*He moves to the hatstand and begins to step into some Wellington boots*) I'm not going to be kind to you this time. Going to kick you where it hurts most, you bloody awful, fickle, generator!

Even as he speaks, the Lights flicker and come on again, and a moment later the wireless comes back on, playing music

Lucky for you! (*He takes his food to the table, and sits to take alternate bites from the cheese and bread*)

The wireless loses station again; Peter rises to correct it

Male BBC Announcer Britain and France are now wholeheartedly pledged to defend Poland against attack should it come. In the House of Commons all parties endorsed Prime Minister Chamberlain when he asserted that...

The radio loses station again

Peter re-tunes the wireless. During the following, Peter remains by the wireless, listening intently. It is clear he understands German

Male German Announcer Erneut versprach Reichskanzler Hitler die Unabhaengigkeit der Slowakei und verzichtete auf jegliche Gebietsansprueche. Erneut machte er geltend, daß sein einziges Ziel der Frieden in Europa sei, stellte aber gleichzeitig klar, dass sein Hauuptanliegen das "Reich" und die "Reichte des Vaterlands" waren und bleiben werden. Das Wetter hierzulande wird heute... [*Translation: Chancellor Hitler again promised independence for Slovakia, and discounted that he had any claims to the territory. He asserted again that his only aims were for peace in Europe, but at the same time made it clear that the Reichland and the rights of the Fatherland were, and would remain, his prime concen. On the Home Front—the weather today is expected to be...*]

Peter switches it off and returns to his breakfast

The stable door rattles and Suzy Hinchcliffe enters. She is quite a lot younger than Peter, with a fresh-faced, waif-like quality that makes her vulnerable. Her clothes are drab, suitable for work, covered by a top coat

Peter I thought we were supposed to be economizing. You know how much it costs to fuel that generator?
Suzy What brought this on?
Peter You left the lights on when you went to work.
Suzy I did not.
Peter They were on when I got up.
Suzy Well ... perhaps I did. I overslept, had to run most of the way.
Peter Christ! What a miserable, unfeeling bastard I am.
Suzy I do wish you wouldn't swear.
Peter Can't help it, it's enough to make a saint spit blood. You going off in the early hours to clean up other peoples' messes.
Suzy That's the way hotels are run.
Peter Hotel? It's a pension with pretensions.
Suzy Darling, we need the money.

Peter I know, and that's what tears me up, you having to work, while I…? I just wish I could provide better for you.
Suzy I'm not complaining.
Peter No, you never do. You're Number One on my list. Mind you, it is a very short list.
Suzy I hope so.
Peter C'mon, sit down, I'll make you some breakfast.
Suzy No, thanks. Tell the truth I've been feeling a bit queasy. Anyway, I had a croissant up at the hotel.
Peter Mean buggers are feeding you now, are they?
Suzy No, that was Antoine. The breakfast chef.
Peter Antoine? You haven't mentioned him before.
Suzy He's new. Only been there the last month. (*During the following, she removes her coat and dumps it on to the hatstand*)
Peter And taken a shine to you, has he? You'll have coffee at least? (*He lifts the kettle and starts to make coffee*)
Suzy I think he'd be more likely to take a shine to you.
Peter Oh, he's like that, eh? I better be careful, then.
Suzy He saw you the other morning working in the field—stripped to the waist. He mentioned it.
Peter *Very* careful. Entranced by my manly body, was he?
Suzy Saw the scars on your back, and said a very curious thing.
Peter Oh?
Suzy Said they looked more like they'd been made by barbed wire, than in a car accident.

Peter almost slops the coffee he is pouring

Peter And what would he know! Stupid, snooping…! He should mind his own damned business!
Suzy (*a bit taken aback by his reaction*) He was only offering an opinion.
Peter He should keep his blasted opinions to himself and stop poking his nose where it doesn't belong!
Suzy Peter!
Peter (*calming down*) Sorry, but I've told you before how that accident affected me. I don't like to be reminded. You sure you wouldn't like a bit of breakfast?
Suzy I have to go out again later, I want to get changed.
Peter Better be making a move myself.

Suzy exits through the internal door

Peter starts to get ready to go out: dons a jacket, and boots. He starts to stack

some paintings into a carrying bag. He takes down a top coat, then starts to search through the hatstand

(*Eventually*) Suzy?

Suzy (*off*) Yes?

Peter Darling, have you seen my beret?

Suzy (*off*) On the hatstand.

Peter There's everything on the stand except the kitchen sink, *and* my beret!

Suzy (*off*) Probably stuffed into a wellie.

Peter searches through the boots and finds his beret crushed into one, smoothes it, dons it at a jaunty angle

Peter Got it.

Suzy (*off*) Don't know why you bother.

Peter It impresses the customers. A masterpiece from the brush of a local artist.

Suzy (*off*) Local!?

Peter If they are Brits, or better still, Americans, I put on a bit of the "haw-haw-haw" *and* the beret. Give them the whole Chevalier: "Madam admires zee way I have painted zee poppies?" It can add a few francs to the sale.

Suzy enters through the internal door. She has changed her dress to something a bit brighter

Suzy And a few extra francs are always welcome.

Peter I'm feeling lucky today, the sun is threatening to shine. Customers—if there are any—will be in a spending mood. Yes indeed, I really have that lucky feeling!

Suzy You wouldn't mind walking to the market, then?

Peter Eh?

Suzy I have to go to Digne, and I'd like to take the car.

Peter The car? You mean "Le Heap", don't you? But take it by all means, the walk will do me good.

Suzy (*pecking him on the cheek*) Thanks, darling. (*She takes a scarf from the hatstand*)

Peter What's in Digne, anyway?

Suzy (*hesitating*) We desperately need some new bedsheets and I can get them straight from the factory there. At a discount.

Peter Good thinking. (*He hefts his bag*) I'll be off, then.

Suzy You've just put it right out of your mind, haven't you? What we were talking about last night. Have you thought any more about us?

Peter puts his bag down again

Peter Suzy, you know how much I love you…
Suzy But not enough to marry me.
Peter We've been through all that. I will marry you, someday, but not now with the world in such a mess, and a war coming…
Suzy You can't know that for sure.
Peter You've heard the reports, there are all the signs…
Suzy Antoine says Hitler only wants to reclaim land he regards as rightfully German.
Peter Antoine? What would he know!?
Suzy He says that if Hitler had aggressive intentions there would already be German agents here in France, doing sabotage. There hasn't been any evidence of that, has there?

Peter regards her for a moment

Peter If there were agents here, don't you think they'd be secret, undercover.
Suzy Oh, come on, Peter.
Peter Hitler has his intentions, you don't know the man.
Suzy And you do, I suppose?
Peter No, of course not, but reading between the lines…
Suzy You're just using it as an excuse not to commit.
Peter Any fool can see that his ambitions are much wider.
Suzy But I'm not any fool, Peter, I'm the woman who shares your bed.
Peter Suzy… *Suzy*. A band of gold won't make me love you any more than I already do.
Suzy No, but it would stop me feeling like a … a scarlet woman! You know, back home in England my friends and family would shun me.
Peter But you're not back home. We're here in France, they're more tolerant here, there's no stigma here. Darling…

He moves to embrace and kiss her, until she moves away

Suzy Nothing will make you change your mind, then?
Peter I'm sorry.
Suzy That's what you always say.
Peter But I *am* sorry, and I want to try to make you understand… (*He pauses*) Look, go and get your bedsheets, and while you're at it… (*He produces some franc notes, presses them into her hand*) Buy something for yourself, eh? A hat or—whatever, some luxury for *you*. Something to perk you up.

Suzy looks at the money in her hand

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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