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Murderer

A Play

Anthony Shaffer

A Samuel French Acting Edition

SAMUEL FRENCH
FOUNDED 1830

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MURDERER

The original version of this play was first presented in London at the Garrick Theatre by Michael White, on 12th March, 1975 with the following cast:

Norman Bartholomew	Robert Stephens
Millie Sykes	Patricia Quinn
Sergeant Stenning	Warren Clarke
Elizabeth Bartholomew	Caroline Blakiston

Directed by Clifford Williams
Designed by Carl Toms

The action takes place in Norman's house

Time—the present

PRODUCTION NOTE

Approximately thirty minutes should elapse between the start of the play and the first words "Now that you've gone and left me crying . . ."

An effective way to show the interior of the bathroom and the sauna is to have walls of gauze, so that when they are in use they can be lit and visible to the whole auditorium, and when not in use they would be dark. Prominent in the living-room is a big window admitting north light.

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ACT I*

Scene 1

As the House Lights fade we see the exterior of Norman Bartholomew's house silhouetted against a winter's early evening sky. It is a large sprawling country house surrounded by garden. It is either painted on a scrim with light fading on it to reveal the interior of Norman's living-room, or better still, a film clip of such a house, into the single lighted window of which we track while his voice speaks over. Threatening music can come either from a radio, or be overlaid at appropriate moments throughout the play to highlight tension, movie fashion

Norman (*"in a thought voice"; over*) To become a murderer—that in the last few years has crystallized into my single, constant, unappeasable passion. Not a casual killer in a bar room brawl, or a senseless slayer in a squalid domestic squabble, but a great classic murderer—a man who understands the true nature of the act of murder—who actually knows that once a man has killed deliberately his inhibitions are destroyed because he has fully looked on mortality. My ambition is to join that alien clan of which no member knows the other, and to set my face against the world. Thereafter I will be alone, proudly walking the sinful way to salvation, and utterly magnificent in my belief in the certainty of divine forgiveness. I must also confess that my obsession is not wholly concerned with philosophical gratification. Personal vanity plays a large part, as it does with most obsessions, and my aim is to ensure that if I cannot be famous, at least my crime will make me infamous for all time, and this is why I look forward to the concluding scenes of the drama with the greatest possible relish—that is to say when I am caught, as of course I need to be. A huge public will catch glimpses of me being huddled into and out of police cars, or see artists' impressions of me in the dock of the number one court at the Old Bailey, or stare at wax effigies of me in Madame Tussaud's, wearing some of my actual clothes which I will have lent them, glaring ferociously out at them from some nightmare tableau, and they will wonder enviously if they could ever themselves cross that great divide between timorous man, and proud killer, for all know it takes the ultimate courage for man to challenge God in this manner. My only regret is that hanging has been abolished, and with it the awesome mystery of the three clear Sundays between sentencing and execution, the hearty breakfast, the eight o'clock walk, and the unconsecrated ground. It is however enough

*N.B. Paragraph 3 on page ii of this Acting Edition regarding photocopying and video-recording should be carefully read.

to be known to be among the elect—to stand with Heath and Haig, and Christie and Crippen and the other supremely notorious killers . . . and I shall!

At the end of this speech we discover **Norman Bartholomew**, spotlit, or otherwise identified by Light as the owner of the thought voice we have been listening to. He is a good-looking smooth man of about thirty-five dressed casually in slacks and sweater. He is standing in his living-room at an easel, painting. As the Lights come up, we see that the subject of the portrait is his girlfriend **Millie Sykes** who is lounging in an easy chair reading a magazine. She is ten years younger, vivacious and sexy

The increased light also reveals the set—an artist's studio-cum-living-room with the usual painter's paraphernalia littering the place. Prominently displayed on the back wall is a picture of an attractive, blonde, forceful woman of about forty-eight. Other pictures of murderous scenes in the style of Francis Bacon are round the room. Upstage L is the kitchen area containing *inter alia*, a gas stove and sink with running water. Behind this area is a passage leading to the front door. C stage is the living area containing a sofa, armchairs, tables with lamps, television set and a large pot-bellied stove vigorously alight. R is a door from which a flight of stairs lead down to an unseen cellar. Upstage R a flight of stairs leads to an upper gallery on which are a bathroom and adjoining sauna, the door to which is concealed behind a bathrobe on a peg. Opposite it R is a large free-standing old-fashioned bath tub

Millie smiles at **Norman** and shifts her position. He abjures her to sit still and paints away vigorously. Occasionally she turns the pages of the magazine and he frowns. Finally in dumbshow he offers her a drink. She nods acceptance and he mixes her one and she takes it. He gives her a kiss, then goes back to examine the canvas, then before resuming painting adjusts her hair, puts on the radio, then mixes himself a drink and toasts her. They both drink deeply. He returns to the easel, regarding her slyly from time to time. Suddenly there is a crash as the glass slips from her fingers, and she slumps unconscious. He crosses rapidly to the chair, and takes a scarf from the back of it. This he puts carefully round the girl's throat and pulls it tight. With much grunting and straining he maintains the pressure for a full minute. He then examines her critically, taking her pulse, listening to her heart etc. Satisfied that she is dead, he delicately picks out the scarf from the folds of the neck. He then strips the body of its clothes and hangs them carefully in a closet. Suddenly he stiffens as if hearing a noise, and stands listening

He goes quietly through to the front door and opens it. After a long moment, he closes it and locks it, and returns to the body which he wraps in a blanket

His next action is to take a pair of pliers and remove a number of teeth from the head. These he puts in a glass dish and pours acid on them from a glass-stoppered bottle. Fumes rise from the dish

Now he picks up the corpse and carries it up the stairs to the bathroom.

After a few moments he puts the light on and tips the body into the bath with a dull, soft thud. He then hangs it upside down on a butcher's hook and makes an incision to drain the blood. He then folds the blanket neatly and descends the stairs with it. Quickly he strips to his shorts and crossing into the dining area, dons a full chef's plastic apron. He also selects a butcher's knife, and a meat saw, and places them on a central table. He then descends to the cellar and returns with a half a dozen sacks which he places next to them

A car's lights pass the window and we hear the car slow and stop

In a sudden panic he rushes to the window and looks out. After a long moment the car starts and the lights move on. With a sigh of relief he leaves the window and moves back to the kitchen where he gives himself a large whisky and a calming cigarette. He examines his hand which is shaking. Gradually it stops

Now he takes the knife, saw and sacks upstairs to the bathroom and having taken the body down from the hook gets to work on it. He begins with the knife and then changes to the saw, and we hear the very explicit noise of it cutting through bone. Eventually we see him straighten up holding an arm which he puts in a sack. He then detaches the second arm, and holding up the hand he takes off the ring from the ring finger. He then puts the arm in another sack. Carrying the two sacks he leaves the bathroom and crosses to the stove. He throws them in, where they start to sizzle furiously. We now see that his apron and hands are covered in blood. He now lights a blow torch and melts the ring in a pestle. He throws the mess in the stove

Suddenly a newspaper is pushed abruptly through the letterbox and slaps on the floor

He jumps in alarm, and picks it up. The headline reads "Torso Found in Tea Chest". The photograph is of the accused with a coat over his head being escorted by Police Officers. He sits down to read it with evident pleasure. After a moment or two he rises and throws down the paper, now bloodstained

He returns to the bathroom, taking up to it an electric drill with garden saw attachment and goes to work on a leg. The task is extremely strenuous, but he finally succeeds in detaching it with much cracking and whirring from the electric saw, and puts it in a sack. He again walks down to the stove and throws it in

A timer clock rings, startling him. Wiping his sweating brow with the back of his forearm he crosses to the kitchen, and puts on the kettle. He then opens the oven and takes out a spit on which is a roast of beef. He detaches the meat and puts it on a plate. The spit he washes, dries and replaces in the oven. He regards the roast of beef fondly, comparing its colour and texture with his own dripping hands. Fastidiously he washes them under a tap before carving off a decent slice and making himself a neat sandwich which he seasons elaborately with salt, pepper and mustard. He primly cuts off all

the crusts and then starts to eat it as he saunters back to the bathroom to start work on the last limb. Before picking up the knife, he carefully props the plate with the sandwich on the side of the bath, takes a bite and munches cheerfully as he cuts. Putting down the knife, he starts sawing, but the vibrations succeed in tipping his sandwich and plate into the bath. He retrieves the plate and then the sandwich, which he is about to take a bite out of, when he sees it is saturated with blood. Briefly he debates eating it, but reluctantly rejects the idea, replaces it on the plate, and puts it on the floor. He continues with the sawing until he achieves a successful severance, whereupon he puts the leg in a sack and once again walks down the stairs to the stove

Halfway across the room there is a sudden piercing shriek. Involuntarily he drops the sack, and whirls round to face the bathroom, as if fearing the corpse had come alive. Almost immediately he realizes it is only the kettle and grins ruefully to himself. He picks up the sack with the leg in it, and tosses it into the stove before crossing to the kettle and turning it off. He makes himself a cup of instant coffee, and lights a cigarette which he inhales deeply. He crosses to the television set and puts it on, and sinks gratefully into a chair. A picture of hands cutting meat in close-up comes up on the television screen. A television announcer says "Pooch is solid meat with no added cereals. Pooch makes pets pant for Protein!" He changes the channel. The film being shown is "M". Peter Lorre, the Dusseldorf murderer, is being chased through the streets by an angry mob. **Norman** watches fascinated for a few moments before reluctantly turning it off and trailing upstairs, with a chopper he has taken from the wood basket. In the bathroom he sets to work to cut off the head. The blows are deliberate and sickening. After three or four he straightens up, holding the head by its hair. He examines it closely, then kisses it playfully on the nose

Suddenly the telephone shrills. He drops the head back in the bath and takes an involuntary run down the stairs towards the instrument. Then he pauses, listening to it ring, goes to it, and is about to lift the receiver when he stops himself. In an agony of indecision he stands with his bloody hands held out above the telephone. Finally it stops and he retraces his steps to the bathroom where he packs both the torso and the head in sacks and carries them over to the stove and throws them in

Returning to the bathroom he scrubs the floor round the bath, then cleans the electric saw, handsaw, knife and hatchet in the bath, and walks downstairs to replace them in their original places—the chopper in the wood basket and the saws and knife in the kitchen

Now he goes back to the bathroom to scrub out the bath meticulously and then strips himself for an intensive wash. During the course of it the soap slips from his fingers and lands on the floor. He thinks about retrieving it, but settles for another piece, and leaves it there. He dries himself

He then walks into the bedroom to dress, hanging the bloodstained apron over the bannisters as he goes. In the bedroom we hear him singing cheerfully as he dresses

Norman (*singing, off*) "Now that you've gone and left me crying" . . . *etc.* . . .

Suddenly the doorbell peals loudly

The singing stops abruptly. Norman emerges from the bedroom wearing sweater and slacks and looks anxiously towards the front door and then at the stove. He stands indecisively doing nothing

It sounds again impatiently

Slowly he goes towards the front door and is about to open it when he checks himself, and looks round to examine the room for any signs of his recent activity. As the door bell sounds again, he sees the bloodstained apron hanging over the bannisters

Stenning (*off*) Open up! . . . Police!

Norman runs quickly across the stage to retrieve the apron, and then crosses to thrust it into the stove. He then runs out to the front door and throws it open

Norman Sorry to keep you. I was in the bath.
Stenning Is that so, sir? In the bath eh? Perhaps it would be better if I stepped inside.

Stenning forces his way past Norman into the room. We see he is a wry, dangerous policeman, some years older than the other man. He is in uniform

It is Mr Bartholomew isn't it? Mr Norman Bartholomew?
Norman Mr Norman Cresswell Bartholomew actually. And you're Sergeant Stenning aren't you? How can I help you?
Stenning (*looking slowly round the room*) I'm investigating a complaint from one of your neighbours.
Norman Nothing serious I hope.
Stenning Extremely serious, sir. Very serious indeed.
Norman I know. I've been pissing on Mrs Green's sunflowers again?
Stenning I did say it was extremely serious.
Norman The vicar's found the fly buttons I put in the plate last Sunday?

Stenning stares at Norman blank-eyed

(*Continuing, somewhat discomforted*) Perhaps he's sewn them on that old grey suit of his. They've been missing for the last couple of years. As a matter of fact it's him you ought to be investigating. I'm absolutely convinced he spends his afternoons on the common dressed as a tramp flashing the Girl Guides.
Stenning (*pointing to the window*) Your neighbour, Mrs Ramage, called the station a few minutes ago, and said she saw you through that window acting in a highly suspicious manner.

Norman looks guiltily at the window and moves to draw the curtains

Norman Suspicious manner?
Stenning Criminal would be nearer the mark.

Norman Bomb-making or buggery?

Stenning Strangling a woman.

Norman What . . . ! I've been all alone here this evening.

Stenning She couldn't be sure, but she thought it might be your wife. After which she said she saw you strip the body, and carry it upstairs into another room, and then get undressed yourself.

Norman My God, who'd have thought old Mrs Ramage was a peeping Tom?

Stenning She further said she saw you return to get a saw and some knives and later a hatchet for the purpose, she presumes, of dismembering it.

Norman (*singing*) "I'll dismember you in all the old familiar places".

Stenning Would you mind not singing, sir.

Norman Why not? Both Wood and Billings were recorded as having sung mightily after they were apprehended for hewing up John Hayes.

Stenning What are you talking about?

Norman The pawnbroker John Hayes. Killed him with a coal hammer under the Brawn's Head Inn, New Bond Street at the instigation of his wife.

Stenning I still don't follow you.

Norman Well, it was all a bit before your time I expect—seventeen twenty-five. His wife Catherine boiled the flesh off the decapitated head to make it unrecognizable, and Messrs Wood and Billings carried it in a bucket to the Thames near Lambeth Bridge where they threw it in. It was all to no avail, however. The head was recognized and they were caught. Which only goes to show, Sergeant, that if you want to get away with spouse-disposal, you've simply got to make the body unrecognizable.

Stenning (*stolidly*) Exactly so, sir. Mrs Ramage also said she saw you carrying a number of sacks.

Norman You know the strangest thing is that anyone should actually recognize a pawnbroker. I mean—you know—you shuffle in rather embarrassed, not looking him in the face, and muttering " 'ow much'll yer give me for this lot guvner? It's been in the family a hundred and fifty years. It's me great grandmother's twenty-four carat solid gold dilldoll . . . must be worth a packet". You know the sort of thing. But you certainly don't go in for much eyeball contact do you now?

Stenning Sir! Would you please give me your attention.

Norman I assure you you have it. You were telling me an improbable tale of me quartering my wife and gift-wrapping her in sacking. What exactly was I meant to have done with these parcels.

Stenning She didn't know. Apparently you passed out of her line of vision.

Norman How strange. I always thought Mrs Ramage had X-ray eyes.

Stenning I'd rather like to take a look round, if you don't mind. Let's see if we can't find a boiled head or two.

Norman Now look here, Sergeant, you really can't believe all this rubbish. I mean, do I look the sort of bloke who'd carve up his missus?

Stenning In my experience there's no one who couldn't answer to that description.

Norman In full sight of the neighbours?

Stenning I agree it all does sound a bit far-fetched, but I have to check. I'm sure you understand.

Norman I'm not sure I do. As you can see, this room is devoted to the gentle pursuit of the Arts.

Stenning Some people believe that murder is an art, sir. Excuse me. (*He walks over to the kitchen area and starts to examine the saw and the knives which are arrayed on a magnetized steel bar on the wall*)

Norman suddenly sees the blood-stained evening newspaper. He picks it up, folds it inside out, and nonchalantly starts to read it. Stenning shoots him a suspicious look and continues his examination of the hardware

Very bright and shiny, sir.

Norman I like to keep things properly.

Stenning turns to stare at the portrait of Mrs Bartholomew hanging on the wall

Stenning Most commendable, sir. By the way, where exactly is your wife?

Norman She's away.

Stenning Away . . . ? Where?

Norman I don't know exactly. Some hospital outside Birmingham, I think she said.

Stenning You mean she's ill?

Norman I mean she's a gynaecological surgeon. She's doing some operations there.

Stenning But are you expecting her back fairly shortly?

Norman Frankly I'm not sure that I'm expecting her back at all.

Stenning (*shooting Norman an inquisitive glance*) Oh?

Norman Well I suppose it's no secret in the village that my wife and I don't particularly get on. Recently she's been hinting that she's found another feller, and is thinking of leaving me.

Stenning I see. And may I ask what your attitude was to what she told you?

Norman (*with simulated passion*) Blind, brute jealousy. I'd rather cut her up in the bath, than let another man possess her.

Stenning regards him levelly. Suddenly Norman bursts out laughing. Stenning gives him a furious look

Stenning (*affronted*) I think I'll take a look at the bathroom, sir. Which way is it?

Norman Up there. But whatever for?

Stenning It makes things bright and shiny.

Stenning brushes past Norman and makes his way across the room and up the stairs to the bathroom. Norman watches his progress with some trepidation, crossing to the bottom of the stairs for a closer view as Stenning kneels to examine the bath with minute care. After a long moment he straightens up apparently satisfied

Norman No grimy ring, Sergeant? Would even my mother-in-law approve, as they say in those craven commercials?

Stenning Of your bath, sir, yes. But not of your eating habits. I found this under it. (*He produces the blood-sodden sandwich from under the bath*)

Norman stares at it, then slowly walks up the stairs as if mesmerized. He tries to meet the Sergeant's stony gaze, then finally bends to peer closely at the sandwich

Norman I'm afraid I like my roast beef rare, Sergeant. A crime, I know, in most English restaurants, but surely not in common law.

Stenning sniffs the sandwich gingerly, then offers it to Norman so pressingly that he has to take it

Stenning Quite right, sir. Pity to waste it.
Norman I've had enough thank you. (*He tries to throw it down the lavatory*)

Stenning grasps his wrist like lightning, and retrieves the sandwich, which he then places in a small cellophane bag, and pockets it

If you want a snack, Sergeant, you only have to ask. Didn't your mummy ever tell you it's very rude to grab. (*He turns off the light*)

Norman stalks down the stairs

Stenning follows him, and starts prowling round the living-room looking in chests and cupboards for signs of the body. Near the stove he suddenly stops and sniffs. His face wrinkles in disgust, and he takes a hard look at the stove, which he transfers to Norman, who flinches away from it. Briskly he steps forward, preparatory to throwing open the door

Norman (*involuntarily*) No!!

Stenning opens the door of the stove and peers inside. He recoils almost instantly

Stenning My God!

Stenning reaches in and tries to extract something with his naked hands, but it is too hot. He looks around desperately for some implement, and he grabs a pair of fire tongs standing up against the wall. With these he drags out the head, and lets it fall on the floor, where it rolls about smoking foully. He manages to beat out the sparks in the hair which are causing the smoke. Norman watches him horror-struck backed up against a wall, apparently incapable of speech. But suddenly he starts babbling wildly

Norman I had to do it Sergeant. Can't you see that. . . . She was always on at me, nagging . . . never leaving me alone . . . insanely jealous of everybody I might happen to speak to. Night after night . . . never any sleep. . . . Who was I with . . . ? Who was my lover . . . ? Creating scenes in public . . . hounding me wherever I went . . . making me a laughing stock. You do see, don't you? I had no choice. (*He falls on his knees sobbing*)

Stenning who has been examining the head, regards him curiously. After a long beat he picks up the head by the hair and holds it aloft. Very deliberately he takes a palette knife from a side table and knocks the skull with it. It gives off a dull, hollow clanging sound. Alternatively he can pop out a glass eye so that it

rolls across the floor. Either way it has to be immediately apparent to the audience that it is a dummy and not a human head

Norman starts to giggle

Stenning Is this some sort of sick joke? This isn't a body. It's some kind of dummy or wax work.

Norman To be exact it's aluminium. . . . (*He picks one of the limbs out of the stove with the fire tongs, and waves it under Stenning's nose*) But the limbs are made of expanded polystyrene, stiffened with wire and filled with stage blood—what film stuntmen refer to as Kensington Gore—made it myself as a matter of fact. (*He puts the limb back in the stove*)

Stenning puts the head down and turns very deliberately to face Norman

Stenning (*coldly*) I think you owe me an explanation.

Norman No, I don't think I owe you anything, Sergeant. But because I'm a genial, gregarious sort of fellow, I'll supply you with one. Why not take a seat and make yourself comfortable?

Stenning You've been making a fool out of me. I want to know why.

Norman Not at all. I may have been making a fool out of myself, but that's surely up to me.

Stenning And what's more, you've been obstructing me in the performance of my duties. All that stuff about murdering your wife because she was jealous.

Norman A little play-acting, that's all. The end of the fantasy has surely got to be self-justification.

Stenning Now you look here, Mr Bartholomew. You'd better start making some sense, or I'll take you down to the station and have the Inspector sort it out.

Norman (*resignedly*) Oh all right!

Stenning To begin with—what's this here fantasy you've been talking about?

Norman Why, that I was Bukhtyar Rustomji Ratanji Hakim of course.

Stenning Eh?

Norman Better known as Buck Ruxton, the Parsee doctor who in nineteen thirty-five murdered his wife and spent a whole night carefully draining her of blood, cutting her up in a bath, and making her up into neat little bundles for disposal. As a matter of fact he later killed a servant who suspected him, but my resources didn't run to that.

Stenning (*incredulously*) You mean you've been play-acting you were him?

Norman Exactly.

Stenning What in the world for?

Norman It's very simple. I wanted to know what it felt like actually doing it—you know—the fear of a sudden caller, of tell-tale blood on clothes, of identification through teeth or jewellery.

Stenning (*shaking his head in bewilderment*) But you weren't actually doing it. You were just pretending. That's hardly the same thing.

Norman I have a very vivid imagination, Sergeant. What I may lose in moribund verisimilitude, I gain in inventive artistry.

Stenning Here, hang on a minute. Just let me get all this straight. Now you

actually made this dummy and filled it with stage blood, and then hacked it up in the bath simply in order to reproduce the crime of this Doctor Buxton?

Norman Ruxton. Yes, I've already said so.

Stenning But in God's name, why?

Norman It gives me a thrill that's why. Oh don't look so disapproving Sergeant. It takes all kinds you know. Some people can't live without the excitements of hang gliding or drag racing. So far I've been Frederick Henry Seddon, the Tollington Park killer who disposed of his tenant with arsenic, and George Chapman who poisoned three of his so-called wives with strychnine, and Henry Wainwright, the Whitechapel Road murderer.

Stenning Oh and what did he do?

Norman Silly man, he made the most fearsome mistake, using chloride of lime instead of quicklime. You see it had the effect of preserving the body of his mistress, whom he had concealed under some floorboards, rather than destroying it.

Stenning And you reconstructed that?

Norman Indeed I did. But that wasn't the best bit. That came when like him I took a cab across London with the disinterred remains wrapped in brown paper, in the company of an unsuspecting ballet dancer, smoking a cigar to disguise the smell. Well in my case I actually used five pounds of ancient bloaters to simulate the odour of human putrefaction, and the ballet dancer was really more of your Soho stripper, but the effect was much the same.

Stenning (*looking at him aghast*) You actually did that?

Norman Certainly. I took the exact route he did. Down Whitechapel Street, over London Bridge to the Borough High Street, though I'm afraid the actual ironmonger's shop where Wainwright was arrested has been demolished. It's such a shame when these old land-marks get torn down, don't you think, Sergeant? Perhaps I'll found a society for the Preservation of Murderers' Monuments.

Stenning shakes his head dumbly. Norman chuckles delightedly as he moves to pour himself a large glass of whisky

Will you join me?

Stenning Not just now. Listen, are you a bloody nutter or something?

Norman A nutter? I don't think so. I just like to pay homage to the great murderers of the past . . . to Doctor Neil Cream who prowled Lambeth in the nineties, cross-eyed and top hatted, dispatching ladies of the evening with nux vomica . . . to Louis Voisin, the Charlotte Street butcher who minced his paramour into trays of offal . . . to Florence Maybrick who, it was said, turned her husband's stomach into a druggist's drainpipe. . . . Why the very names should bring grateful tears of nostalgia to your eyes.

Stenning They sound like a right load of villains to me.

Norman On the contrary, they were heroes every one—master practitioners in the world of bizarre homicide. Take the case of Patrick Mahon for example. He's particularly apropos. Surely you remember the Crumbles Bungalow murder case?

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