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SF PERUSALS

Audience with Murder

A thriller

Roger Leach
and Colin Wakefield

Samuel French — London
www.samuelfrench-london.co.uk

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AUDIENCE WITH MURDER

First produced in a slightly different version by Theatre Maketa in the Theatre Truck at the Edinburgh Festival in August, 2004 with the following cast:

George	Tim Charrington
Sally	Leda Hodgson
Kim	Aimée Thackray
Charles	Darren Cheek

Directed by Hank Turnbull
Designed by Nick Kidd
Lighting and sound by Luci

This version was first produced by Double Honours Productions, in association with Theatre Maketa, at the Jermyn Street Theatre, London, on 21st February 2006 with the following cast:

George	Dudley Rogers
Sally	Leda Hodgson
Kim	Pippa Duffy
Charles	Bryan Pilkington
The Voice of Ken Wheelwright	Colin Wakefield

Directed by Colin Wakefield
Designed by Colin Mayes
Lighting and sound by Luci
Company stage manager Peter Adshead

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(See also page ii)

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CHARACTERS

George, an actor, aged fifty-five,
playing **Gerald**, **Alan** and **Vernon**

Sally, an actress, aged fifty-five,
playing **Sue** and **Vivienne**

Kim, an actress, aged twenty-five,
playing **Hannah**, **Kelly** and **Simone**

Charles, an actor, aged twenty-five,
playing **Sebastian**, **Dean**, **McTavish** and **Matt**

Ken Wheelwright, a theatre producer, voice only

NB. Only the characters **Alan**, **Sue**, **Dean**, **Kelly**, **McTavish**, and possibly **Ken Wheelwright**, should appear in the theatre programme.

The action takes place in a living-room

ACT I Around 8 p.m.
ACT II Five minutes later

Time—the present

NOTE ON THE ACTING EDITION

Audience with Murder is four thrillers in one. Only two levels are ever "in play" at any one time, and these are distinguished in the text by different margins, and a vertical line down the left side of the page to clarify where there is an indentation. The reader should be aware of the different levels from the start, but an audience will only become aware of them as they are revealed during the action of the play.

For example:

Sue Could we just read my play? Do you mind?

> **Sebastian** Hallo, Father.
> **Gerald** Sebastian.
> **Sebastian** How's Mother?

Alan And how come he's in through the door the second after we hear the doorbell?

PRODUCTION NOTE

The design for the living-room should be as simple and uncluttered as possible. In the Jermyn Street production there was a sofa L, on which Dean and Kelly sat for the playreading. Alan had his own comfortable chair R, so he was facing the other two readers. Sue sat on an upright chair UC, next to the drinks table to her left. There were two doorways without practical doors UR and UL, for exits to the hall/loo and the kitchen respectively. When McTavish began his interrogation of Kelly in Act II, he brought her chair down C, where it was then conveniently placed for Matt's terrorizing of Vivienne later. Set dressing was kept to the minimum: some of Alan's theatre posters (from his past triumphs with the Prestige Players) on the back wall, maybe a rug or two, and two small side tables for drinks.

MANAGEMENT OF FIREARMS AND OTHER WEAPONS IN PRODUCTIONS

Recommended reading:

Entertainment Information Sheet No. 20 (Health and Safety Executive). This information sheet is one of a series produced in consultation with the Joint Advisory Committee for Broadcasting and the Performing Arts. It gives guidance on the management of weapons that are part of a production, including firearms, replicas and deactivated weapons.

It may be downloaded from:

www.hse.gov.uk

Or from HSE Books, PO Box 1999, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 2WA. Tel: 01787 881165 Fax: 01787 313995.

Home Office Firearms Law: Guidance to the Police. The Stationery Office 2002 ISBN 0 11 341273 8. Also available on www.homeoffice.gov.uk

Health and Safety in audio-visual production : Your legal duties. Leaflet INDG360 HSE Books 2002.

ACT I

A living-room. About 8 p.m.

There are doorways to the kitchen and hall L *and* R. *The furniture comprises an upright chair,* UC, *a sofa and armchair, a drinks table and two small side tables.*

When the CURTAIN *rises, everyone is seated in the living-room of Alan (GEORGE), forty-seven, and his wife Sue (SALLY), forty, who are holding a playreading. With Kelly (KIM), twenty-five, and Dean (CHARLES), twenty-four, they are reading "The Play's The Thing", a thriller written by Sue. Alan is reading the part of Gerald and Kelly, Sue's friend, is reading Hannah. Dean's character, Sebastian, is yet to appear*

We join "The Play's The Thing" about twenty minutes into the action

Gerald, a sixty-year-old surgeon, is enjoying a quiet evening at home with Hannah, a twenty-five-year-old private nurse. They are finishing their bottle of wine after a good dinner. It is about 9 p.m.

Hannah He was the sweetest old man, he really was. But he couldn't manage the stairs, you see, towards the end. So we had to make up a room for him downstairs. Trouble was, the only available space was this tiny utility room. No more than a cupboard, really. Where they used to keep the mops and brushes and buckets and things. There wasn't enough room to swing a cat, let alone nurse a ninety-seven-year-old. Bless him. He didn't mind, though. He was downstairs, where the action was. But I used to get the giggles every time I went in. You see his name was Mr Broome. Albert Broome. Spending his last days in the broom cupboard. It cracked me up.

Gerald laughs

It's good to hear you laughing, Gerald.

Gerald Broom cupboard. Oh, dear.

Hannah laughs

I could do with a top up.

Sue (*reading the stage directions*) "Gerald pours himself a glass from the bottle."

Alan gets up and pours himself a glass from the bottle

Alan Anyone else?
Sue Alan…
Dean (*holding out his glass*) Cheers, Mr Downing.
Alan Look, I've told you — it's Alan. We've just done a play together, for God's sake.

Alan fills Dean's glass

Dean Sorry. Alan.
Alan Kelly?
Kelly Go on, why not? Thanks, Alan.

Alan fills Kelly's glass

Alan (*to Sue*) Darling?
Sue Could we just get on?
Alan Sorry, sorry. (*He sits. Pause*) Where was I?
Sue "I could do with a top up".
Alan (*finding his place*) Ah, yes …

Gerald Darling?
Hannah No more for me, Gerald, thank you.
Gerald Broom cupboard!
Hannah I've been so lucky with my patients. I've had a couple of cantankerous old sods, but on the whole they've been wonderful people.
Gerald That's to your credit, my darling. Sylvia wasn't always the easiest of women.
Hannah I thought she was lovely. When I think of how she suffered. Particularly these last few weeks.
Gerald I could never have got through this without you, Hannah.
Hannah You'd have managed. A lot of people go to pieces. I've seen it. But I knew you'd be all right.
Gerald Sylvia adored you.
Hannah She was a very special woman.
Gerald I feel twice blest.
Hannah So, when are you going to tell Sebastian?
Gerald Sebastian will be fine.
Hannah Gerald, we've got to tell him.

Gerald All in good time. He's my son. So I decide.
Hannah I mean, we don't have to rush to tell him about us, but we can't not tell him about the death of his own mother.
Gerald Look, I thought I made myself clear. You don't know him, I do.
Hannah I've spoken to him on the phone.
Gerald He's a sensitive boy.
Hannah You make him sound about ten.
Gerald He wouldn't be able to cope. I'll tell him after his exams.
Hannah What am I supposed to tell him next time he rings?
Gerald Whatever you told him the last time. Say she's asleep. Anything. I don't care.
Hannah I think it's very wrong.
Gerald Hannah. Sweetheart. Family matters. Enough said.
Hannah It's unkind, Gerald.
Gerald (*with edge*) Hannah!

Pause

Hannah What if he just turns up?
Gerald He won't "just turn up". He's got exams.
Hannah So?
Gerald In Norway.

Sue Ding dong!
Alan Dear God.
Sue (*sharply*) Alan!
Alan I mean, obvious or what?
Sue (*reading the stage direction*) "Enter Sebastian, tw" — —
Alan "He won't 'just turn up'." Ding dong. Enter Sebastian.
Sue (*tight-lipped, pressing on*) "Enter Sebastian, twenty-one, Gerald and Sylvia's son. He is tall, willowy" — —
Alan Willowy!
Sue "Tall, willowy, and handsome in a weak kind of way. Sebastian is a pharmacy student, studying in Norway, and he is unaware of his mother's recent death."
Alan We already know that.
Kelly Not all of it.
Sue It's a stage direction, Alan.

Sebastian Hallo, Father.

Alan Some stage direction.
Sue Could we just read my play? Do you mind?

Sebastian Hallo, Father.
Gerald Sebastian.
Sebastian How's Mother?

Alan And how come he's in through the door the second after we hear the doorbell?
Kelly Alan — —
Alan Enter Sebastian, twenty-one, a tall, willowy magician given to making impossibly sudden entrances in god-awful thrillers.
Sue It's a first draft.
Alan Tell me some news.

Sebastian How's Mother?
Gerald Dead.

Alan (*exploding with mirth*) Ha!

Hannah Gerald! How could you?

Alan Ha, ha, ha!
Sue Alan, I'm warning you.
Alan OK, OK. I'll be good. I promise.

Sebastian Dead? But how… ?
Gerald She had a terminal illness, Sebastian.
Sebastian When did it happen?
Gerald Wednesday — —
Sebastian (*incredulously*) Three days ago?
Gerald — last week.
Sebastian Ten days? That's when I last spoke to her.
Gerald Indeed? Well, every cloud — —
Hannah Gerald!
Gerald You keep out of this.
Sebastian When's the funeral?
Gerald The day before yesterday.
Hannah I'm so sorry, Sebastian.

Pause

Sebastian Do I get introduced, or what?
Gerald This is Miss Freebody.

Alan shakes his head in disbelief

Sebastian My mother thinks… thought… very highly of you, Miss Freebody.

Alan (*to Sue*) You're not really calling her Freebody, are you?
Sue Shh!

Hannnah Hannah. Please do call me Hannah. We've spoken on the phone.
Sebastian Yes. (*To Gerald*) I can't believe you kept this from me.
Gerald You had exams. We didn't want to upset you.
Hannah We?
Sebastian What about Mother? Didn't it occur to you she might have wanted me here?
Gerald She didn't seem too bothered.
Hannah That's not true, Gerald.
Gerald You spoke to her the day she died. Did she express any burning desire to have you at her bedside?
Sebastian You just wanted me out of the way. You were always jealous of my closeness to Mother. That's why you packed me off to that poisonous boarding school at the age of eight.
Gerald It was high time you learned to stand on your own two feet.
Sebastian It nearly broke her heart.
Gerald Proving my point entirely. She'd turned you into a right little Mummy's boy.
Sebastian It was your way of splitting us up.
Gerald Rubbish!
Sebastian (*to Hannah*) Did you know she had a first-class law degree?
Hannah No, I — —
Sebastian She was a high-flying commercial lawyer before she married this toe-rag. He made her give it all up when I was born and he never let her go back.
Gerald She didn't need to work.
Sebastian You didn't want her to work. Stuck at home all day you could bully and patronize her to your heart's content.

Alan (*getting up to pour more wine*) God, this is turgid.
Kelly It's good.
Alan The speeches are too long.
Kelly Speeches?
Alan It's a family argument, for God's sake. Where's the cut and thrust? It should really come alive after Sebastian's entrance. All he does is drone on and on.
Kelly Like someone else I could mention.

Alan What?
Kelly Look, I was invited here to read Sue's play, not to listen to you pontificating all night.
Alan It may be news to you, Kelly, but my wife has invited me to direct this masterpiece of theatrical magic for the Prestige Players next season.
Sue And the invitation will shortly be withdrawn, Alan, if you don't shut up.
Alan (*magnanimously*) Very well. Carry on. (*He sits*)
Sue Thank you. (*Pause*) Dean?
Dean Oh, it's still me. Sorry.

Sebastian Stuck at home all day you could bully and patronize her to your heart's content. Just like you used to bully me.
Gerald I don't have to sit here and listen to this tripe.

Alan Good one, Susan!
Kelly
Sue } (*together*) Shh!

Sebastian Nothing I ever did was good enough, was it? (*To Hannah*) The day I told him I wanted to study pharmacy, do you know what he said? He said, no son of mine's becoming a bloody chemist. Well, I'm sorry, Father. I couldn't make it as an astro-physicist. I didn't have the A levels.

Alan Remind me where you did that writing course, darling.
Dean Don't rise to it, Mrs Downing.
Sue You know perfectly well, darling. I studied evening classes at the City Lit.
Alan I hope you asked for your money back.
Kelly Alan!
Alan They clearly taught you sod all.
Sue Write about what you know. That was their advice.
Alan Astro-physics a hobby of yours, is it?
Kelly Can we just get on?
Alan Fine by me. Let's get it over with.

Sebastian Did you know he used to lock me in my bedroom to make me study?

Alan Oh, I get it.

Sebastian He actually beat me once for failing an exam.

Alan It's me, isn't it?

Sue Now why should you think that?
Alan I'm Gerald. How too, too subtle. And you — let me guess — you must be Sylvia. The long-suffering, talented, perfect little wife. You should look in the mirror sometime, dear. You're both brain-dead, I suppose you've got that much in common. That's how you see me, is it? Violent father and adulterous husband. I'm surprised you didn't put in a dead daughter while you were at it.
Kelly (*shocked*) Alan!
Sue You bastard.
Alan Or is that a treat in store?
Sue You utter bastard!

Dean stands up

Dean Look, I think I should — —
Alan You stay where you are.
Sue Dean, don't go. It's all right.
Alan You've got the poor boy confused. What dead daughter, he's asking himself.
Kelly Alan, leave it.
Alan She knows, of course. Thick as thieves, those two. Actually wondered at one stage if they were having an affair. You know, an item.
Sue Don't be ridiculous.
Alan No, I did. Really. (*To Dean*) She'd come home from the hospital full of Kelly this, Kelly that. I was starting to get quite jealous.
Sue She was the only person who showed me any kindness. I needed someone to talk to, Alan.
Alan You could have tried talking to me.
Sue You!
Alan Debbie was my daughter too, you know.

Sue pours herself another glass of wine

Sue You killed her, Alan.
Alan Pour yourself another glass, my darling, why don't you? Get drunk and embarrass us all to death.
Sue You drove the poor girl to her grave with your constant carping and sarcasm. Nothing she ever did was good enough for you. She didn't stand a chance.
Dean Look — —
Alan Sit down, dear boy. Have another drink We still have my wife's sweet little play to finish, starring Gerald, a thinly disguised version of *moi*: bully, adulterer and now, we gather, a child murderer.

Kelly (*to Dean, cutting through the sarcasm*) Debbie was Alan and Sue's daughter. She took an overdose last summer, just before she was due to sit her A levels.
Dean Jesus.
Sue (*quietly*) She was seventeen years old.

Pause

Kelly (*rising to go*) Dean's right. I'll call you in the morning, OK?
Sue No. Stay, please. Both of you. I'm fine, really.
Kelly Are you sure?
Sue Please.

Kelly sits, then Dean

Alan (*beginning to enjoy himself*) Excellent! Then let us waste no more time in resuming the epic. Dean — your shout, I believe. Something about me — sorry, Gerald — beating you to a pulp for failing an exam.

Pause, while Dean finds his place

Sebastian I want to know, Hannah — did my mother suffer? Towards the end, I mean.
Hannah She died quite peacefully.
Sebastian Was she in a hospice?
Hannah No, she died here. At home. That was her wish. I was with her at the end.

Alan "At the end". "Towards the end". You shouldn't repeat phrases like that, you know. It's very sloppy.
Sue Alan!
Alan Sorry, sorry…

Sebastian (*to Gerald*) And where were you when she died?
Hannah He was working. Your father's been under enormous pressure, Sebastian. He needed to get away. But he's been a tower of strength these last few months. To your mother, of course. But also to me, particularly towards the end.

A snort from Alan

Sebastian To you?
Hannah It hasn't been an easy time for either of us.

Sebastian Excuse me. May I ask you a question?
Hannah Of course.
Sebastian What exactly are you doing here? In my mother's house? She died ten days ago. You were her nurse. It's nearly ten o'clock at night. Why are you here?
Gerald Hannah's been a good friend to me, Sebastian.
Sebastian I bet she has.
Gerald What's that supposed to mean?
Sebastian You're sleeping with her, aren't you? You're sleeping with my mother's bloody cancer nurse. You bastard.

Sue (*reading the stage direction*) "Sebastian starts beating Gerald with his fists."

Hannah Sebastian, be careful. You know your father has a weak heart.

Alan Weak heart, eh? Ha! Another subtle parallel. So as to leave no lingering doubt.

Sebastian How long has this sordid little affair been going on?
Hannah It's not what you think, Sebastian.
Sebastian He doesn't usually waste much time.
Gerald Sebastian, that's enough.
Sebastian I'd guess a couple of days after you moved in. Am I right? Screwing the night nurse while the patient's dying in agony in the next door room. Did you ever stop to think what a charming man my father must be? This hardworking "tower of strength"? This dutiful, bastard husband? Don't imagine you're the first. He's always had an eye for the young nurses. Easy pickings in the hospital. For the big chief consultant surgeon. He used to get a hard-on at the mere whiff of a nurse's uniform. It's true. I heard him boasting about it once. Mother knew what was going on. She'd have known about you for certain. I wonder how that makes you feel? My mother was a saint.

Alan P-lease!

Sebastian The thought of you two actually doing it. As she lay dying. You disgust me.
Gerald Offended your delicate sensibilties, have we?
Hannah Your father and I are planning to get married, Sebastian.
Sebastian I always wondered when he'd trade her in for a younger model. She was a stunning woman, my mother. But he's always preferred them young. As you'll no doubt discover for yourself in due course. Mind you, I expect the old pervert's powers are a bit on the wane.

Alan No long speeches, eh?
Kelly Alan, do shut up.

> **Sebastian** Sixty next birthday. He's no spring chicken. Probably needs more than a couple of starched aprons to get him going nowadays — eh, Father? Don't think I didn't spot the Viagra on top of the bathroom cabinet last Christmas.

Sue Still marking the parallels, darling?
Alan Bitch!

> **Hannah** Your father and I are in love, Sebastian.
> **Sebastian** I don't think so.
> **Hannah** Gerald — —
> **Sebastian** He's never been in love with anyone in his life. Unless you count being in love with yourself.

Alan This is such bollocks.
Sue Hit another raw nerve, have we?
Alan It's pathetic.
Kelly I'm rather enjoying it.
Alan I don't mean the play. I mean what she's trying to do. It's embarrassingly obvious that the silly cow's written this preposterous load of old garbage with the sole purpose of trying to humiliate me. God alone knows what you two simple souls have done to deserve this bizarre form of marital role-play, but I dare say all will be made plain.
Sue Alan — —
Alan Yes, yes. Read on. I'm beginning to get into this. (*Pause*) Oh, it's me. (*He has to find his place*) Er …

> **Gerald** Piss off back to Norway, why don't you?
> **Sebastian** Was there — —

Alan They're not going to like all this language at the Prestige Players.

> **Sebastian** Was there a post-mortem?

Alan We're jumping about a bit, aren't we, old girl?
Sue Oh, for heaven's sake ...
Alan Didn't they teach you about structure at the City Lit? Or were you off studying brain surgery that week?

> **Hannah** The cause of death was obvious.
> **Sebastian** I'd have insisted on a post-mortem if I'd been here.

Gerald You weren't here.
Sebastian Only because I wasn't told.
Hannah What exactly are you suggesting, Sebastian?

Alan Ooh, that it must have been murder! How exciting!
Sue Alan — —
Alan (*turning the page*) Nearly the end of the scene. I feel a curtain line coming on.
Sue Do shut up!

Sebastian Who stands to benefit from Mother's will?
Gerald She never made a will.
Sebastian That's a lie.
Gerald She died intestate. As her husband her entire estate passes to me under the law.
Sebastian Including the property in Norway?
Gerald I'm hardly likely to risk killing my wife for a couple of mangy acres of Norwegian farmland, now am I?
Sebastian Who said anything about killing?
Hannah Gerald!
Gerald Seb, old son — —
Sebastian You murdered my mother, you bastard! You murdered my mother!

Alan (*theatrically*) Da da!
Sue Curtain. End of Act One, Scene One.
Alan Thank Christ for that. Somebody give me a drink.

Sue passes the bottle of wine. Alan goes to the drinks table to pour himself a brandy

Dean, fancy a brandy?
Dean Not for me, thanks.
Alan Come on.
Dean It's really good, Mrs Downing. That's a great ending to the first scene.
Alan Not bad for a melodrama.
Dean Did they really murder the wife? Gerald, I mean?
Sue All will be revealed, Dean, my love. That's what the whole play is about.
Alan Loath as I am to contradict our esteemed authoress, the whole play is about me. Get Alan — that's the name of the game. And there, my angel, you have singularly failed.
Dean Do you mind if I use your… um…
Alan In fact, I'm rather enjoying myself.
Sue It's straight through the hall. On your right.

Dean Cheers.

Dean exits

Alan Fine young actor, that boy.
Kelly I like him doing the accent. It's very good.
Alan (*filling Kelly's glass*) Could have gone to drama school if he'd had the guts.
Sue If he'd had the money. It costs a fortune to train as an actor nowadays. And they've cut right back on grants.
Alan How come you're so knowledgeable?
Sue He was telling me.
Alan Dean?
Sue The other night.
Alan (*archly*) Oh yes?
Sue At the theatre. (*To Kelly*) We've just done *Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf?*
Kelly I know. I'm sorry I missed it.
Sue Alan played George — —
Kelly Naturally.
Sue And he got Dean to play Nick. He's one of Alan's ex-pupils. I told you that. He was very good, wasn't he, darling?
Alan It was a strong cast.
Kelly Didn't you want to play Martha?
Alan Ha!
Sue God, no. I don't act any more anyway. I just do front of house — coffee, programmes, that sort of thing.
Alan All she's fit for.
Kelly (*pointedly, to Alan*) How many thrillers have you written, then?

Dean enters

Alan You don't seriously call this pathetic little effort a thriller, do you?
Dean It's good.
Alan Ha!
Dean But I was thinking … I hope you don't mind me saying this, Mrs Downing — —
Sue Go ahead.
Dean You said you wanted feedback …
Alan Spit it out.
Dean I was wondering if it isn't all a bit static at the beginning. I mean, before Sebastian comes on.
Kelly You've got to set the scene, haven't you?
Alan Not for twenty-five bloody pages you haven't.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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Samuel French London



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SF **PERUSALS**