THE BUSINESS OF MURDER

by Richard Harris

SAMUEL FRENCH

Copyright © 1981 by Richard Harris
Revised 2025
All Rights Reserved

THE BUSINESS OF MURDER is fully protected under the copyright laws of the British Commonwealth, including Canada, the United States of America, and all other countries of the Copyright Union. All rights, including professional and amateur stage productions, recitation, lecturing, public reading, motion picture, radio broadcasting, television, online/digital production, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved.

ISBN 978-0-573-11017-7

concordtheatricals.co.uk
concordtheatricals.com

FOR AMATEUR PRODUCTION ENQUIRIES

United Kingdom and World
excluding North America
licensing@concordtheatricals.co.uk
020-7054-7298

Each title is subject to availability from Concord Theatricals, depending upon country of performance.

CAUTION: Professional and amateur producers are hereby warned that *THE BUSINESS OF MURDER* is subject to a licensing fee. The purchase, renting, lending or use of this book does not constitute a licence to perform this title(s), which licence must be obtained from the appropriate agent prior to any performance. Performance of this title(s) without a licence is a violation of copyright law and may subject the producer and/or presenter of such performances to penalties. Both amateurs and professionals considering a production are strongly advised to apply to the appropriate agent before starting rehearsals, advertising, or booking a theatre. A licensing fee must be paid whether the title is presented for charity or gain and whether or not admission is charged.

This work is published by Samuel French, an imprint of Concord Theatricals Ltd.

The Professional Rights in this play are controlled by The Agency, 24 Pottery Lane, Holland Park, London W11 4LZ.

No one shall make any changes in this title for the purpose of production. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, scanned, uploaded, or transmitted in any form, by any means, now known or yet to be invented, including mechanical, electronic, digital,

photocopying, recording, videotaping, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher. No one shall share this title, or part of this title, to any social media or file hosting websites.

The moral right of Richard Harris to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

USE OF COPYRIGHTED MUSIC

A licence issued by Concord Theatricals to perform this play does not include permission to use the incidental music specified in this publication. In the United Kingdom: Where the place of performance is already licensed by the PERFORMING RIGHT SOCIETY (PRS) a return of the music used must be made to them. If the place of performance is not so licensed then application should be made to PRS for Music (www.prsformusic.com). A separate and additional licence from PHONOGRAPHIC PERFORMANCE LTD (www.ppluk.com) may be needed whenever commercial recordings are used. Outside the United Kingdom: Please contact the appropriate music licensing authority in your territory for the rights to any incidental music.

USE OF COPYRIGHTED THIRD-PARTY MATERIALS

Licensees are solely responsible for obtaining formal written permission from copyright owners to use copyrighted third-party materials (e.g., artworks, logos) in the performance of this play and are strongly cautioned to do so. If no such permission is obtained by the licensee, then the licensee must use only original materials that the licensee owns and controls. Licensees are solely responsible and liable for clearances of all third-party copyrighted materials, and shall indemnify the copyright owners of the play(s) and their licensing agent, Concord Theatricals Ltd., against any costs, expenses, losses and liabilities arising from the use of such copyrighted third-party materials by licensees.

IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

If you have obtained performance rights to this title, please refer to your licensing agreement for important billing and credit requirements.

THE BUSINESS OF MURDER was first presented at the Theatre Royal, Windsor, in association with David Gordon Productions on 10th February 1981. Subsequently presented by Bill Kenwright in association with the Windsor Theatre Company at the Duchess Theatre, London, on 2nd April 1981. The play directed by Hugh Goldie and designed by John Page. The cast was as follows:

HALLETT.....George Sewell
STONE.....Francis Matthews
DEE..... Lynette Davis

This revised version of the play was first presented by Take Note Theatre Ltd at the Tabard Theatre on 23rd October 2024. It was directed by Nick Bromley and designed by Lily Minores and Rob McKinley. The cast was as follows:

HALLETT..... Gary Webster
STONE..... Miles Gallant
DEE..... Charlotte Hunter

CHARACTERS

HALLETT
STONE
DEE

SETTING

The action takes place in a first-floor flat.

Act One

SCENE I An autumn afternoon at about three thirty p.m.

SCENE 2 Just before eight p.m. the same evening.

Act Two

A few moments later

TIME

1980s

ACT ONE

Scene One

(The sitting room of a first-floor flat in a converted house in a London suburb. About three thirty p.m. on an autumn afternoon in the early '80s.

Upstage right is the entrance to a small lobby in which are the unseen main door and a second unseen door to the bathroom. The lobby is shaped by the well of the stairs leading to the floor above.

Downstage right is the partly open door to an unseen bedroom.

Centre is a sofa with a coffee table before it. Downstage left is an easy chair and small side table. Stage right there is a small portable television set standing on a small table, angled to be viewed from the sofa. There is a window with a part-closed venetian blind in the upstage wall. Beneath the window there is a small desk and an upright chair. Near the desk is a shelf unit holding a few books and bits and pieces. Between the bedroom door and the lobby, pushed against the wall, is an old railway trunk, labelled and secured with an obviously new padlock.

Upstage left a section of the room has been partitioned off by units to form an open kitchen area. The rear unit houses a sink, a small fridge, a microwave and a kettle. Above the unit are two shelves holding condiments, a few tins of food and odds and ends of tableware. Left of this area is a small curtained window.

*The sitting room, usually very tidy, is in something of a mess. The television has been moved closer to the sofa. The cushions on the sofa are disarranged as though someone has been lying full-length. On the coffee table before the sofa are a tray bearing the remains of an egg and bacon meal, two empty cans of beer, an empty and crumpled cigarette packet and a side plate holding a part-eaten sandwich, a small slab of cheddar cheese and a kitchen knife. On the floor near the table are an overflowing ashtray, a discarded newspaper and the telephone that has been moved there on its trailing lead from the desk. The television set is turned on and the low sound of a racing commentary can be heard.**

At rise of curtain **HALLETT** *stands, hands in his trouser pockets, jiggling coins. He is in his 40s. He has goodish looks going a little puffy round the eyes through too many long sessions with too many short drinks. He has a deceptively casual manner but a short fuse. He wears a well-worn hat and an unbuttoned light-coloured raincoat over a grey suit, plain*

* A licence to produce *The Business of Murder* does not include a performance licence for any third-party or copyrighted recordings. Licensees should create their own.

blue shirt and loosely-knotted tie. As a CID officer he's used to entering other people's homes and putting himself at ease. He continues his coin jiggling as he unhurriedly, efficiently, takes in the room. Then he takes off his hat, tosses it down and makes to take off his coat as.

STONE *comes out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He is about the same age and build as* **HALLETT**. *He is rather nondescript and wears glasses. A humourless, rather prissy man. He wears a dark raincoat over an oldish but well-preserved suit. He gives a hopeless little gesture and – as though he can't believe it.)*

STONE. He isn't here.

*(***HALLETT** *pauses in taking off his coat, but decides to shed it anyway and tosses it carelessly down by his hat as –)*

HALLETT. How long did you say we'd be?

STONE. Sorry?

HALLETT. *(Patiently.)* When you phoned him, how long did you say we'd be?

STONE. I said we were coming straight round. I said you understood the situation and… *(With a sudden flash of irritation.)* What's he playing at for God's sake? Either he wants me to help him or… *(His irritation becomes anger.)* Look at this mess.

(He turns off the television and moves it back to downstage of the bedroom door then scoops up the newspaper, folds it and puts it on the sofa and puts the ashtray on the table as.)

HALLETT. Par for the course nowadays.

STONE. Sorry?

HALLETT. Kids. Teenagers.

*(**STONE** puts the telephone on the desk as –)*

STONE. Would *your* son carry on like this?

HALLETT. Haven't got one. Haven't got any. Got a dog, though. What is it they say? Insanity is hereditary: you get it from your kids.

STONE. Oh. Yes. Very good. *(He manages a tight smile.)* Look. I'm very sorry.

HALLETT. Perhaps he just went out for some fags.

STONE. He had no right going anywhere.

HALLETT. Possible though.

*(He picks up the empty cigarette packet, sniffs it briefly then drops it back onto the table, and moves away to glance into the kitchen area. Which clearly irritates **STONE** who puts the beer cans, ashtray and cigarette packet onto the tray. **HALLETT** turns and watches expressionlessly as **STONE** takes up the tray with one hand and bends to take up the side plate with the other. As he does, the knife falls from it on to the floor. He dithers slightly and **HALLETT** takes up the knife by the handle and puts it on the tray for him.)*

STONE. Thank you.

*(He takes the things and deposits them in the kitchen as **HALLETT** takes out a packet of thin cigars and makes to take one out with:)*

HALLETT. You don't mind.

(He indicates the cigar and is about to light it but –)

STONE. Well actually… I do, yes. Sorry. It's just something I… sorry.

(A moment and **HALLETT** *clicks off his lighter and puts the cigar back into the packet as –)*

HALLETT. Quite right, terrible habit. I'd give it up but the doc says it's only the tar that's holding me together.

(Again the flat smile and again the joke, for what it was worth, is lost on **STONE** *who starts tidying the cushions.)*

Do me a favour, eh?

STONE. Sorry?

HALLETT. Relax.

STONE. I know it's ridiculous but I – I just don't seem able to cope.

HALLETT. I'll cope. It's my job. Just the one bedroom is it?

STONE. Bedroom?

HALLETT. The room you sleep in. Etcetera.

STONE. Yes. Just the er just the one, yes.

HALLETT. You don't mind if I have a quick shufti. *(He's already moving to the bedroom door.)*

STONE. Is that really necessary?

*(***HALLETT** *opens the door and looks inside the bedroom.)*

HALLETT. I like your curtains.

STONE. *(Tetchily.)* Do you?

HALLETT. Oh yes, very *House and Garden*, very Laura Whatsit.

STONE. I did say he wasn't here.

HALLETT. So it's just the bedroom, the kitchen…

STONE. And the bathroom. Quite an unusual combination wouldn't you say?

HALLETT. The bathroom being…

STONE. Just inside the door.

(He makes an over-polite open-handed gesture in the direction of the lobby. **HALLETT** *moves to the lobby but pauses and:)*

HALLETT. I bet you've got blue water.

(He goes into the lobby and out of sight. **STONE** *stands for a moment, then moves to close the bedroom door. A moment. Then he moves towards the lobby.)*

STONE. Look – perhaps I should telephone you or something.

HALLETT. *(Coming in.)* Give it ten minutes. Now I'm here.

STONE. Or perhaps I should just let him get on with it.

HALLETT. No rush. Not for me. How about you?

STONE. No, I – I've taken the afternoon off.

HALLETT. I was wrong about the water, wasn't I?

STONE. Perhaps next time you come.

*(***HALLETT** *smiles. A moment.)*

HALLETT. Live on your own, do you?

STONE. Since my wife died. We had a house, but…well, when Clive – my son – decided to go off and "do his own thing" there didn't really seem much point.

*(***STONE** *frowns, as though suppressing some painful memory but snaps out of it with an attempt at conversation.)*

You're married, are you?

HALLETT. Fifteen years next month.

STONE. It's a – it's a good marriage then, is it? I mean… *(He gives an awkward little smile, aware of the gaucheness of his remark.)*

HALLETT. How d'you mean "good?"

STONE. Well I …

HALLETT. She puts up with me: man can't ask for much more, can he?

STONE. I didn't mean to…

HALLETT. …Course you didn't.

STONE. No.

*(***HALLETT** *deliberately says nothing. This moment and…)*

Although I have to say I've often thought it must be very difficult, married to a policeman.

HALLETT. Oh yeah?

STONE. It's a very – demanding job, isn't it? Policework? I suppose if you're a really good policeman it becomes – well – obsessive. I understand that the divorce rate is very high.

HALLETT. Do you?

STONE. I suppose it's all those – unsocial hours you have to work. Shift work, isn't it? Sometimes all night. Although I suppose… No, that's very rude of me.

HALLETT. *(Irritated, but maintaining an all-boys-together bonhomie.)* Come on now, let's have it.

STONE. It's – well – it could be construed as offensive.

HALLETT. I couldn't construe anything, Mr Stone, I'm not educated enough.

STONE. Well…what I meant was…if you were a bit of a ladies' man – I mean not you, I mean someone in your job – well, being out all night and presumably not having to strictly account for your movements – well I'm sure you know what I mean.

HALLETT. Naughties on night-duty.

STONE. Well…yes.

HALLETT. 'S why most of us are in the job, Mr Stone… plenty of fresh air, nice little pension and ample opportunity to get your leg over – did he bring anything with him?

STONE. Sorry?

HALLETT. Your son. When he suddenly descended on you last night. Did he bring anything?

STONE. No. *(But, as if just remembering.)* Well…yes. He brought this.

*(***STONE** *indicates the trunk with its shiny new padlock.)*

HALLETT. *(Looking down at the trunk.)* Came on his bike then, did he?

STONE. That's a point. *(He frowns.)* I suppose someone must have given him a lift. I didn't think to ask: it was all so – confusing at the time.

HALLETT. *(Prodding the trunk with a foot.)* Heavy is it?

STONE. *(Frowning.)* I've no idea.

HALLETT. You didn't help him up the stairs.

STONE. No. *(Suddenly irritated.)* I said. He telephoned, I told him I had to go out and arranged to leave the key.

HALLETT. Under the mat.

STONE. Well…yes.

HALLETT. No wonder you people get burgled.

*(**STONE** grasps one of the handles and lifts that end of the trunk.)*

STONE. Not that heavy. Try it.

HALLETT. Bad back. He didn't happen to mention what was in it?

STONE. Well yes. Books and things.

HALLETT. "Things."

STONE. His things, all his things.

HALLETT. *(Nods and.)* Nice new padlock. Wonder if it works?

STONE. You…you think we should open it.

HALLETT. Waddaya think we'll find?

STONE. *(Insisting.)* Do you want me to open it?

HALLETT. Not our property, is it? Mind you, we could always say we smelled gas.

STONE. *(Looking around.)* I suppose there must be something I could use…

HALLETT. No no – leave it.

STONE. I thought you…

HALLETT. Let *him* do it. Eh? *(He sits.)* And you've no idea where he's been living?

STONE. *(After a slight pause.)* He wouldn't say. Some sort of squat I imagine. I doubt that he could afford anything else. He's never been exactly…wonderful relationship, isn't it, when a son won't tell his own father where he's living. *(He sits.)* I suppose you see this sort of mess every day of your life.

HALLETT. Pretty much. Tuesdays are the worst.

STONE. Tuesdays?

HALLETT. Don't bother.

(A pause that **HALLETT** *makes no effort to fill.)*

STONE. You bring them up the best way you know how… But that's just it, isn't it? It doesn't seem to matter what you do…it's got nothing to do with class or environment or – or anything. Every time you open a paper there's some kid either taking drugs or pushing drugs or – or dying of drugs. You think – when you do think, because this sort of thing only happens to other people – you think…where did it all start? Where's the need? And then your own son comes home and hits you right between the eyes with it.

HALLETT. If they couldn't get the stuff they wouldn't use it. Money. That's where it starts, Mr Stone. Big business.

STONE. It's not as simple as that, surely?

HALLETT. *(A flash of irritation.)* I'm not a bloody psychiatrist – or a welfare worker bless their little hearts – I'm a copper. You break the law, I feel your collar – yeah, it's as simple as that. Use your phone? *(He's already taking up the phone.)*

STONE. Umm…please.

HALLETT. *(Dialling.)* Just let 'em know I'm still alive.

STONE. *(Anxiously.)* You won't say anything, I mean, we did promise him there'd be no names at this stage…

HALLETT. Scouts' Honour. *(Immediately speaking into the receiver.)* Hello love, Superintendent Hallet, gimmee the C.I.D. Room, will you? *(He cups the receiver.)* You're an informant, Mr Stone. At the minute, it's strictly you and me. *(He uncups the receiver.)* Try and sound a *bit* efficient, will you, I could've been a punter… Oh, I see, you were pre-occupied, were you? *(He winks at* **STONE**.*)* What is it, Playboy or fiddling your expenses?