

LAFAYETTE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

AUDITION PREP PACKET

The Musical Comedy Murders of 1940

Show Explanation, Character Breakdown, and Monologue Prep

THE SHOW

December, 1940. Wealthy, eccentric arts patron Elsa von Grossenkneten has gathered a small theatrical team at her snowbound mansion in Chappaqua, New York. On the surface, it's a backer's audition — everyone believes Elsa is deciding whether to fund the newest musical from composer Roger Hopewell and lyricist Bernice Roth, directed by the pompous Ken De La Maize and produced by the larger-than-life Marjorie Baverstock. Underneath, the mood is haunted: the team's last show, *Manhattan Holiday*, was a flop shadowed by a real string of murders — chorus girls stabbed by a still-unidentified killer the papers dubbed the “Stage Door Slasher.” Undercover cop Michael Kelly, posing as Elsa's driver, is convinced the Slasher is in this very room and is using the gathering to draw the killer out. Layer on a suspected ring of Nazi saboteurs, a blizzard that cuts the house off from the outside world, secret passageways, and a script that keeps breaking into musical snippets, and you get the show's engine: an affectionate, broad parody of the Agatha Christie country-house whodunit, played almost entirely for laughs.

Tonally, this is farce first, mystery second. The murders are real within the story, but the show's job is to be funny — heightened characters, quick reversals, running gags, and a cast who mostly don't realize how absurd their situation is. The two included audition monologues that lean toward genuine tension (the mysterious stranger, the interrogating detective) exist to show whether an actor can play sincere stakes and menace — the skill the show then undercuts for comedy. Auditioners should show they can be both: fully committed to the stakes of the scene, while understanding the piece around it is a comedy. Several roles carry accent requirements (German, Irish, and a comic “New York Italian”), so confident, sustained dialect work is a real asset in the room.

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

Helsa Wenzel — f, 30s-40s (*sings*)

Snapshot: Elsa's German maid. Plays as a stock “ominous servant” type at first — but there's real intelligence and a hidden agenda underneath.

Wants: To keep her real purpose in the house concealed while staying close enough to control what happens.

Comedic engine: Deadpan menace played completely straight — the humor comes from everyone else's reaction to her, not from her trying to be funny.

Playing notes: Required: German accent, sustained through performance. Look for stillness, precision, and a sense that she knows more than she's letting on — the accent shouldn't be the whole performance, just the container for it.

Elsa von Grossenkneten — f, 40s

Snapshot: The wealthy hostess and patron whose money everyone in the house is chasing. Proud of her family's history in German spycraft.

Wants: To be taken seriously as a woman of intrigue and taste — she's playing at being dangerous and worldly.

Comedic engine: Naive and flighty delivered with total self-belief; she narrates her own life like a spy novel and never notices the gap between her self-image and reality.

Playing notes: Big, warm, oblivious energy. This role rewards commitment to non-sequiturs and a total lack of self-awareness — played too knowing, the character stops being funny.

Michael Kelly — m, 40s

Snapshot: An undercover cop posing as Elsa's driver, trying to trap the Stage Door Slasher before they kill again.

Wants: To keep everyone alive and solve the case — he's the one person in the house actually doing his job.

Comedic engine: The straight man. His exasperation with the theatre people around him is the joke; he reacts to the absurdity everyone else is oblivious to.

Playing notes: Grounded, focused, a little weary. Monologue #4 in the prep doc (the interrogation) is close in spirit to this role — real urgency and authority, playing it straight so the chaos around him lands harder.

Patrick O'Reilly — m, 30s

Snapshot: An Irish tenor — or is he? Actually tracking a ring of German defectors, hiding behind a broad performance of “the Irishman.”

Wants: To maintain his cover while getting close enough to the suspected defectors (especially Helsa) to expose them.

Comedic engine: A performance within a performance — he's an actor playing a spy playing a stereotype, and the fun is in the seams showing.

Playing notes: Required: passable Irish accent, New York Italian accent, and a good German accent — all from one actor. This is the most technically demanding role in the show; audition should demonstrate real facility switching between voices cleanly.

Ken De La Maize — m, 40s

Snapshot: The director. Pompous, self-absorbed, always dropping the names of famous people he claims to have worked with.

Wants: Recognition and adulation — he needs the room to be impressed with him at all times.

Comedic engine: Wounded vanity. He's funniest when his need for praise runs headlong into a house full of people who couldn't care less.

Playing notes: Big theatrical affect, a little too much perfume in the voice. Look for actors who can make the name-dropping feel compulsive rather than performative — he believes every word of it.

Nikki Crandall — f, 20s–30s

Snapshot: A chorus girl and dancer who reads as an innocent, sweet Broadway hopeful — with more going on underneath.

Wants: On the surface, her big break. Underneath, something she's not telling anyone.

Comedic engine: Charm as camouflage — the sweetness is a little too polished, and sharp actors can let that crack show in small moments.

Playing notes: Play the ingenue fully and sincerely — don't wink at the audience early. Monologue #3 (the doubt/newspaper piece) is a useful contrast piece for this role: it shows the actor can drop the bright surface and play real unease.

Eddie McCuen — m, 20s–30s (sings)

Snapshot: A struggling comedian who ends up an accidental hero. Funny and awkward, mostly by accident.

Wants: To land a joke, land a job, and not get killed — roughly in that order.

Comedic engine: Physical comedy and flop sweat — he's the character things happen to, and his heroism is stumbled into rather than chosen.

Playing notes: Strong choice for an actor comfortable with physical comedy and timing on jokes that are supposed to land badly. Likability under the awkwardness is key — the audience needs to be rooting for him.

Marjorie Baverstock — f, 40s

Snapshot: A Broadway producer. Larger than life, seems silly at times, but her whole life is genuinely dedicated to the arts.

Wants: To get this show funded and produced — it's not vanity for her, it's devotion.

Comedic engine: Big, brassy bravado with a real heart underneath — funniest when the size of her personality is played with total sincerity.

Playing notes: Don't play her as a joke — play her as someone who has earned the right to be this loud. Monologue #1 (the reveal/confrontation piece) suits an actor who can hold a room with commanding, controlled energy, which overlaps well with this role.

Roger Hopewell — m, 30s (*plays piano & sings*)

Snapshot: The composer. Often sarcastic, teasing the others frequently. Has a brother-sister dynamic with lyricist Bernice Roth, and is smarter than he lets on.

Wants: To keep things light and needle everyone else — partly personality, partly a way of managing his own anxiety about the situation.

Comedic engine: The wisecracker. His jokes are sharp and a beat ahead of everyone else's understanding of what's going on.

Playing notes: Quick, dry timing over broad mugging. The “smarter than he acts” note matters — there should be a sense he's choosing to be the funny one, not that he can't be serious.

Bernice Roth — f, 30s (*sings*)

Snapshot: The lyricist. Hyper, emotional, easily upset, wildly creative — and has a penchant for drinking.

Wants: To be understood and taken seriously as an artist, in a house that keeps treating her as the excitable one.

Comedic engine: Emotional whiplash — she swings from thrilled to devastated to inspired within a single scene, and the speed of the swings is the joke.

Playing notes: Full commitment to big emotional swings, played sincerely rather than for camp. Monologue #3's spiral from denial to dread is a good technical match for the range this role needs.

WOMEN

Monologue 1 (Helsa)

"Everyone! I thought it was Fraulein Von Grossenknueten... With her out of the way, this house would have been mine. And I wanted people to think the slasher was here. As it turned out, he actually was. I also killed the Gestapo agent... No, O'Reilly. Just a little joke from the cabaret days. As he told you, Klaus Stansdorff. When Franz and I took off with the Fatherland's money, Franz hid in New York with his share. Stansdorff found him and killed him. Stansdorff must have also had information about my sister, so he came here... We were never close. And I needed her identity. As I now need yours."

Given circumstances: Her cover is fully blown, guns are drawn, and her accomplice/brother is dead — she has nothing left to protect.

Objective: To claim ownership of everything she's done and complete her plan by stealing Nikki's identity to escape.

Obstacle: She's surrounded and nearly out of time before she's physically overpowered.

Monologue 2 (Elsa)

"You have heard, perhaps, of the Dreyfuss papers? The Colonel Redl letter? The Kruger telegram? The Von Moltke note? The Hotzendorff memo? The Von Emmich shopping list? Events which changed the course of history; with my father at their center, working in clandestine, covert alliance, cloaked in an atmosphere of secrecy, stealth, and subterfuge."

Given circumstances: She's hosting the whole creative team for what everyone believes is a backer's audition, and she's just been asked (mildly) why the house has secret passages. Her father was reputedly the Kaiser's chief of espionage.

Objective: To elevate herself in the room's eyes — from "eccentric heiress" to a woman of real intrigue and legacy.

Obstacle: Nobody in the room is actually buying it — they're polite but visibly unmoved, so she has to keep escalating the mythology to get any reaction at all.

MEN

Monologue 3 (Ken)

"A fire! Of course! What could be more natural with so many lanterns burning. This house burning to the ground will keep me warm enough till help comes, don't you think? Roger, get up. Elsa, sit down. Act natural! Don't look at the gun! Nice. Good composition. Reminiscent of the final scene from 'Berlin Calling,' the picture I made with Paul Lukas... Helmut Dantine, Conrad Veidt, George Coulouris, Oscar Homolka, and Merle Oberon. A picture which I assume you have all seen, since you've seen everything else I've done, since none of it has been released. Little matter, since you're all going to die. Now, let's see... what can I use to make the flames spread more quickly?"

Given circumstances: He's just been unmasked as the Stage Door Slasher, is holding Roger, Elsa, and Bernice at gunpoint, and needs to destroy the evidence before help arrives.

Objective: To finish what he started — kill everyone in the room and burn the house down to cover his tracks.

Obstacle: He can't resist narrating and performing for his captive audience (compulsive need for recognition), which eats the time he needs to actually act — and gives the others a chance to turn the tables.

Monologue 4 (Eddie)

"It happened to my father. From a bus window. He was on the corner. She was on the bus. They saw each other... Wham! He chased that bus for five blocks... Some girl, he never saw her again. He used to tell me, 'Eddie, when it happens, you'll know. It's chemical. Just hope it ain't the number 17 to Ozone Park. That's an express.' Yeah, it can happen. You just gotta be lookin' for it is all."

Given circumstances: He's alone with Nikki, tension building, and she's just said flatly that she's never believed in love at first sight.

Objective: To convince her (and prove to himself) that it's real, using his father's story as evidence.

Obstacle: Nikki's skepticism, plus his own habit of deflecting anything vulnerable with a joke — he has to fight his own instinct to keep it a bit.