

The Great Theatre Sting of 1895

A Play in IV Acts

By

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Special thanks to Mary Kopp, who edited the script.

Cast of Characters
(9M, 5F, 6Extras, mixed)

Gottlieb Mueller: 24 year old slightly built male, Dresses in plainer late nineteenth century fashions.

Sebastian Hodges/Ivan Slewski: Two identities of the same character. 60 year old man. Dresses in classic nineteenth century fashions. Sebastian Hodges character speaks with an English accent.

Amelia Sedgwick: A 'Yankee Player'. 35 year old woman. Dresses in sophisticated late nineteenth century fashions.

Margaret Wilson: A 'Yankee Player'. Fifty year old woman. Dresses in sophisticated late nineteenth century fashions.

Ferguson Fairchild: A 'Yankee Player'. Sixty year old man. Polished personality, and dresses in sophisticated nineteenth century fashions.

Arliss Kennedy: A 'Yankee Player'. Forty year old man. Polished, dresses in flashy nineteenth century fashions.

Oscar Metcalf: Man in his late twenties. Wears prison clothes.

Milford Churchill: Shorter man, in his mid-fifties. Dresses in sophisticated nineteenth century fashions.

Fritz Meyer: Mayor of Clearwater. Wears formal attire.

The Jailor: Man in his forties. Wears 'police uniform'.

Ruby and Roberta: Twin sisters, about fifty years old, slight builds.

Fireman: Young man dressed in 19th Century firefighter uniform.

Waitress: Woman in her thirties.

Scratch: A poorly groomed, mid-sized dog.

EXTRAS: (6) Of assorted genders, adults, seated amongst the theater audience.

PROPS: A speaker's podium; Six dining type chairs; a dining table; a desk; a 6'x6' wall of jail bars; a dress box.

Scene

Various locations around Clearwater, WI

Time

March 7th, 1895

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING: The lobby of the newly constructed Hotel Clearwater, Clearwater, WI.

At RISE: From the stage, Mayor Fritz Meyer faces, and addresses, the theater audience from behind a podium. The four Yankee Players, along with company 'extra' Gottlieb Mueller, and 'guest director' Sebastian Hodges, sit in six chairs lined up in an arc formation, right behind the mayor. The Mayor speaks in a loud, deliberate, 'campaign mode' voice.

THE MAYOR

Hello good citizens of Clearwater, Wisconsin. We certainly live in exciting times for our wonderful city! We gather here in the lobby of this new, showcase hotel, The Hotel Clearwater, to celebrate an especially glorious occasion. Today, as mayor, I have the great privilege of welcoming back, for a repeat performance of the very famous play, *Buddy*, the world renowned acting troupe, 'The Yankee Players'!

As most of you remember, ten years ago, March of 1885, the renown 'Yankee Players' traveled here to help inaugurate the opening of our newly built opera house. We were so proud of our city, and our excitement boiled over when the 'Players' found time in their very busy and very prestigious schedule to perform here. '*Buddy*', as we all remember, tells the story of a poor, homeless boy falsely accused of murder. It's a play known for tugging on heart strings and drawing tears. I am proud to tell you, that only a few single seats remain unsold for all three performances.

Adding even more excitement to the affair ten years ago, the Yankee Players needed extras from our community to help with their production. I can easily remember the thrill of having some of our fellow citizens up on the stage with these world famous theater performers. I think we all showed particular pride in who played the lead role in that play—our very own Gottlieb Mueller—who will once again reprise his wonderful role of 'Buddy' for the coming performance!

As the director ten years ago, Milford Churchill, was not available for this run, the Players hired a new, guest director. He comes all the way from London, England. To reintroduce the cast of The Yankee Players to you, I now present the director of *Buddy*, Sebastian Hodges!

(SEBASTIAN rises from his seat, and steps elegantly toward the platform. With a sophisticated and regal posture, he looks out over the theater audience, and speaks in a clear, polished, English accent.)

SEBASTIAN

Thank you Mayor Meyer, and you good citizens of Clearwater, for your most gracious of receptions. I will say, since our arrival here yesterday by train, I've found the warmth of your citizenry equal to the beauty of your unspoiled lakes and lands!

In my many years of directing theater, I will now confess: I'd never met The Yankee Players in person before! In fact I'd just met them yesterday, upon our arrival in your fine city!

Quite naturally, this creates an interesting quandary. Many of you got to know something of them ten years ago. Now, it befalls me to introduce them to you as if I know these good folks, and you do not!

Nevertheless, I will ask each member of the troupe to simply stand up at the mention of their name, remain standing for just a few seconds, before sitting back down.

(Each player stands as his or her name is called.)

First of all, we have Amelia Sedgwick. Amelia will again play the role of the sassy young woman in the play. Margaret Wilson will be Buddy's dotting aunt. Ferguson Fairchild will be the lead police detective, and Arliss Kennedy will play the role of the rich, evil, murderer.

Last but not least, as they say, bringing back what I've understood to be the exceedingly popular role of Buddy, I bring you Gottlieb Mueller!

Now, the Players and I will spend the next week in rehearsal at the opera house, after-which I can promise you good citizens a most professional, and exemplary repeat performance of that wonderful play, *Buddy*!

Thank you, once again! I will be most excited to see you at the opera house!

(The Players disperse across the stage, and begin separate conversations amongst themselves--AMELIA and FERGUSON step away and to the right side of the stage)

AMELIA

Not one word spoken about those horrific murders that took place when we visited here ten years ago.

FERGUSON

I'm sure they'd much prefer to leave that forgotten, and in the past. Now, let's disperse to the hotel lounge. I could use some refreshment!

AMELIA

Ah... That sounds like a great idea!

(FERGUSON and AMELIA step off the stage. MARGARET and ARLISS step to the left side of the stage.)

MARGARET

With this Sebastian fellow running the show, instead of Milford Churchill, things will be quite different from what they were ten years ago. We never knew when Milford's bad temper would explode over some obscure mistake one of us would make.

ARLISS

I swear, that little tyrant could be dangerous! I can't say I ever knew a nastier man. Now, let's head to the lounge. Let's toast the welcome absence of Milford Churchill!

(ARLISS and MARGARET leave the stage. SEBASTIAN and GOTTLIEB stand alone in the middle of the stage)

SABASTIAN

Do you think, Gottlieb, that anyone here other than yourself and the woman who hired me to do this job has even the slightest inkling as to who I am, and why I am here? Do you believe that any of the Players suspect that I'm not a play director at all, but a hired private detective from Chicago, Illinois?

GOTTLIEB

No one has any suspicions at all: no one in the Players, nor the citizens of Clearwater. But I do have a question about

the lady who secretly hired and paid you and the Players to come here again. I know her name is Mrs. Gutsch. Why did she go through all the very costly expense of underwriting this performance?

SEBASTIAN

Mrs. Gutsch is a niece of the Schmidt sisters, the two women who were murdered. She lives in St. Louis, and feels strongly that it was a member of the Yankee Players that killed her aunts. Mrs. Gutsch handles the estate and charitable trust of the Schmidt family—which has grown into a considerable sum of money over the last ten years. For Mrs. Gutsch, after endless donations to countless charities and worthy causes, it became time to spend money on bringing the real criminal to justice. She hired me to solve the crime. After reviewing the case, and becoming certain of your own innocence in the matter, I included you as my contact and confidant as I try to solve this mystery.

We hope, by reproducing this play, to discover the truth. The involvement of Mrs. Gutsch must remain a secret until this investigative performance reaches its conclusion!

GOTTLIEB

Thank you for your confidence in me, Sebastian. I've long believed that Oscar Metcalf, the young man who sits in the jail for the murders, to be innocent. I pledge my best efforts in helping you bring justice to Oscar.

SEBASTIAN

And for that, I'm most grateful. Continue to act as if you have no clue as to who I really am! At the same time, I will always use this fake English accent! I will live the role of an English play director until we get to the bottom of things. Furthermore, in any conversation with anyone other than you, I will act as though I don't know anything at all about the murders.

(SEBASTIAN reaches into a pocket, and pulls out an old newspaper clipping)

SEBASTIAN

I have an old newspaper article from The Clearwater Press. It's from Marsh 15th, 1885. Let me skim over it for you.

GOTTLIEB

Please do!

SEBASTIAN

Schmidt Sisters Found Murdered! Entire City in Shock!
Flora and Beatrice Schmidt, middle aged twin daughters of Schmidt Brewery founder the late Augustus Schmidt and his wife Wilma, were both found dead in their Michigan Avenue mansion by their housekeeper this morning. Police arrived to find both bodies on the parlor floor. The two bodies lay just a few feet from each other.

In searching the house, a large wooden Greek Renaissance design built by their father for his family in 1865, and lived in by the sisters, sole heirs to his brewery fortune since their parent's deaths in 1875, the police found neither motive nor substantive clues.

GOTTLIEB

I well remember reading that same article. Please continue.

(SEBASTIAN continues to read)

SEBASTIAN

Immediately upon receiving a message from a Schmidt family neighbor, who'd heard the terrified screams of the housekeeper, The Clearwater Police Department dispatched two officers by horse to the Schmidt mansion.

Upon entering the home, the two officers discovered the following:

In the parlor lay the two bodies. Both lay face down on an area rug in the middle of the floor. Officers found no turned over or displaced furniture, no broken glass from windows or either gas or electric lights, and no spilled contents from drawers: all common indicators of a frantic search for money or jewelry.

The two women, fifty four years of age, were well dressed in colorful calico evening gowns: Beatrice in deep burgundy, and Flora in emerald green. Beatrice's neck showed blue marks indicating strangulation. Flora's forehead showed a deep purple mark centered right above her nose, appearing to be from a fatal

blow. Because of the harsh nature of the injuries, police believe the perpetrator to be male.

GOTTLIEB

These details all come back to me now. The violence was so shocking to us citizens. Everyone knew the Schmidt sisters. They were so devoted to the community--especially when it came to theater. I believe both would have loved being actresses themselves!

(SEBASTIAN continues to read)

SEBASTIAN

It is believed the perpetrator was let in the front door, and that the sisters knew him.

No neighbors near the Schmidt family heard anything unusual happening in or around the Schmidt mansion.

(SEBASTIAN folds the article back up, and puts it into his pocket. He pulls out a second article.)

SEBASTIAN

I have another article from the same date. It's an editorial. It's headlined, 'A Dark Day in Clearwater'.

With the sad and brutal murder of the Schmidt sisters, darkness settles over our city. Beatrice and Flora Schmidt were well known and loved by all who knew them, especially so by those of us who lived in the sisters' beloved hometown. The twins donated endlessly to charities of all kinds, helped finance much needed schools for our children, and heartily supported with their time, money, and effort the betterment of all of Clearwater.

In fact the Yankee Players, a nationally renowned acting troupe performing at the opera house for the first time this week, came here primarily through the generous underwriting of the two sisters.

While we must grieve, and while we must also support the police department in their investigation of the crime, we must also strive to do whatever is necessary to chase away the darkness that now engulfs our fine city, and bring back the happiness and sunshine to which we are so accustomed.

GOTTLIEB

The crime hit Clearwater pretty hard. But I remember another headline from the press. From mid-August of that year. It read "HOMELESS BOY FOUND GUILTY IN SCHMIDT SISTER MURDER CASE! The article went on to mention the name Oscar Metcalf,

seventeen years old, as the suspect.

Oscar was found guilty of the crime after a fast paced trial filled with shaky evidence. Oscar sits in the Clearwater jail to this day. Many of us who live here, including myself, doubt his guilt.

SEBASTIAN

I believe a mysterious elusive truth lies out there in Clearwater. While a prisoner sits in jail for a crime, it does not mean that the crime has really been solved. It does not mean that justice took its proper course.

(SEBASTIAN pulls a photograph from his briefcase)

SEBASTIAN

Now, before we join our fellow troupe members in the hotel lounge, I want you to look at this photograph taken at the funeral. It was shot from the front of the church looking toward those attending the funeral. Do you notice anything?

(GOTTLIEB looks at the photograph)

GOTTLIEB

Someone took a photograph at the funeral? Odd, isn't it?

SEBASTIAN

The sisters were very famous in town. Those able to get into the service probably considered themselves quite important, and didn't mind the photo being taken. Regardless, who do you recognize from the picture?

GOTTLIEB

Why, Milford Churchill sits in the front row with the rest of The Yankee Players, including me. The cast remained in town for the funeral. With the sisters' important ties to the opera house, we felt that we should attend as a group.

SEBASTIAN

How do you know it's him, sitting in the front row?

GOTTLIEB

Because he's looking up. His head is not bowed down in prayer like everyone else's—including mine. That's how I know. That's also why I don't remember a photograph being taken. My head was bowed.

SABASTIAN

Why would Milford Churchill be looking up, when everyone else prays, lost in deep grief?

(GOTTLIEB pauses for a moment)

GOTTLIEB

Because, Milford was not grieving. His mind was distracted!

SABASTIAN

What else could he have been thinking about during the funeral?

GOTTLIEB

I don't know.

SEBASTIAN

Well, I say we start our investigation with this photograph!

(CURTAIN)

(END OF ACT)