

Dramaturge's Notes—Director
Dial "M" for Murder
by Frederick Knott

I. Plot Synopsis

The play is set in the London flat of Tony Wendice, a retired tennis player turned sports equipment salesman, and his wife Margot, a moderately wealthy socialite. When the play opens, Margot is with Max Halliday, an American crime TV writer. They had an affair one year earlier, before he left London, but now he's returned. Having discovered the affair by finding a letter from Max to his wife and pretended to blackmail her in an attempt to get her to confess, Tony has been slowly developing the perfect way to murder his wife and get away with it.

Tony enlists the help of Charles Swann (AKA Captain Lesgate and several other names), a small-time con man who was a few years ahead of him at Cambridge. Tony meticulously walks Swann through the murder plan—which involves Tony leaving a key under the mat when he and Max go to a party, then Swann entering the house, Tony calling so that Margot will come into the room where Swann will kill her, then staging a fake robbery—then offers Swann £1,000 for the murder, and threatens to turn him in as the blackmailer. Swann agrees.

The plan goes awry when Margot manages to stab Swann with a pair of scissors, thereby killing him. Tony rushes home from the party and attempts to remove any evidence that might incriminate him as well as planting the stolen love letter on Swann's body before calling the police. He takes the housekey from Swann's pocket and puts it back in Margot's handbag. The police arrive to investigate and Inspector Hubbard's suspicions are aroused by inconsistencies, leading him to believe that Margot let Swann into the apartment and then killed him for blackmailing her. Hubbard has Margot arrested, and she is convicted and loses her appeal (which we get reported but don't see).

The day before Margot's scheduled execution, Max comes to see Tony and tries to convince him to tell the police that Tony hired Swann to kill Margot. Ironically, the story Max has made up (based on his years writing crime TV) is virtually identical to Tony's actual plan, but Tony argues that no one would believe such a story. Hubbard returns, investigating some recent robberies and asking about Tony's recent habit of spending a lot of single pound notes. Tony's explanation isn't entirely convincing, so Hubbard lays a trap by switching raincoats with Tony (thereby getting Tony's housekey) and then telling him he needs to pick up Margot's handbag at the police station. Max, also suspicious, breaks into the apartment after Tony's gone and Hubbard has returned using the key from Tony's raincoat, and shortly afterwards Margot is delivered by a policeman. They await Tony's return, because the key in Margot's handbag (now the only one Tony has) is actually the key to Swann's flat. He had put the key to the Wendice flat back under the mat where Tony hid it. Tony unsuccessfully tries to open the lock with Swann's key, then when he takes the other key out from under the mat to open the door, Hubbard's suspicions are confirmed, Margot is exonerated, and Tony is arrested.

II. Character Profiles

- Margot Wendice: A somewhat wealthy and well-connected woman who married Tony because he was a dashing tennis star. However, when he focused more on his career than

on her, she fell in love and had an affair with Max, before he left to return to the US. She is pretty easily manipulated by the men in her life, without much will to assert herself or what she wants. She is also a continual victim of Tony's manipulations, first trying to pay off the blackmailer (not knowing that it was actually her husband), and then letting Tony handle the police, which allows him to incriminate her. She doesn't seem to understand any aspect of the investigation, and it is really Max and Hubbard who figure out that she is innocent despite Tony's attempt to frame her.

- Max Halliday: An American writer, currently writing a crime TV show. He spends a lot of time thinking about murder because of his job. Max had an affair with Margot, and he clearly still has deep affection for her. His relationship with Tony is strained, though he and Margot believe Tony doesn't know about their affair. He is perhaps deeply intuitive, as he works out Tony's actual plot but thinks it's a story he made up from his crime writing.
- Tony Wendice: A sociopath who coolly and rationally plots his wife's murder. Tony was a tennis pro, but his glory days are behind him, and now he lives largely off his Margot's money. Tony is calculating, and has considered virtually every contingency in planning his crime. He is a master at manipulating people, knowing just which buttons to push or where to apply pressure to get Margot, Max, and Lesgate to do exactly what he needs them to do for his scheme.
- Captain Lesgate: A disreputable but apparently charming figure, Lesgate (whose real name is Swann) is a small-time criminal and con artist, whose general scam seems to be living in an apartment while dating the landlady before taking off with her money and leaving several months of unpaid rent. However, he has also committed straight thefts, sold drugs (including to a woman who died of an overdose), and was court martialed by the army and spent at least one year in prison. He was educated at Cambridge, so was at one time part of upper social circles, but has fallen into disrepute. He likes gambling on dog racing.
- Inspector Hubbard: The detective investigating the Wendice case. He is deeply suspicious, finding a number of minor inconsistencies and based his doubts about Margot's and then Tony's stories on those minor details. Apart from being a sharp investigator, we don't learn much about him.
- Thompson: A police constable. Thompson isn't that important a character, he basically just delivers Margot to the apartment at the end and takes her handbag back to the police station. He should be dressed as a 1950s police constable.

III. Author Biography

Frederick Knott (1916-2002) was a British playwright and screen writer, famous for crime/mystery thrillers. Although from a wealthy English family, Knott was born in China to missionary parents. However, he was raised in Britain, going to prestigious schools, including Cambridge, where he played tennis. From 1939 to 1946 Knott served in the British military. After serving he moved to New York where he met and married Ann Hillary in 1953. He died in 2002 in New York.

Knott was not a prolific writer, producing only three plays and some screenplay versions of those texts. *Dial "M" for Murder* (1952) is the best known of his plays, in part because of the Alfred Hitchcock film in 1954. He also wrote *Write Me a Murder* in 1960 and *Wait Until Dark* in 1966, both of which were also crime thrillers. Knott lived on the income

from these three plays and their subsequent film versions.

IV. Background and Selected References (I have the Dramatists Play Service version, so if you're working from a different script the page numbers may not match up)

- *Dial "M" for Murder* is heavily influenced by film noir style, which should be kept in mind for production. Film noir tends to rely a lot on lighting, particularly stark contrasts between dark and light. Characters are continually turning lights on and off in the play, as well as lurking in shadows, which provides an excellent opportunity to capitalize on these visual contrasts.
- Noir also uses a ton of foreshadowing, which is definitely evident in Knott's play. The opening section with Max describing the writing he does for crime stories is full of hints about what is coming in the play. This almost heavy-handed foreshadowing can be played up productively to build the feel of a noir thriller.
- This opening discussion is also run through with an ironic self-consciousness. There is a lot of room for the actors to show an awareness of the play as being a scripted narrative. The original version of *Dial "M" for Murder* was a TV movie, so the references to TV writing, movies, crime thrillers, etc. are all purposeful. Knott is drawing our attention to the generic conventions that structure the play we're seeing, and the actors can pull that out in their performances.
- P. 12: Tony refers to taking Max to the Tower of London. This is an ancient fortress at the center of London, commonly thought of by the public as a place where prisoners were tortured. On the one hand, this is a popular tourist site, and so a perfectly innocent suggestion, but on the other hand the association with torture suggests Tony's sinister intentions.
- P. 14: Hampstead 2837, and p. 29: Maida Vale 0401. These are 1950s phone numbers. In the 50s, phone service was run through local switchboards, so you would connect to the operator who would put your call through to the local switchboard, which would then connect you to the right number. Hampstead and Maida Vale are both London neighborhoods.
- P. 30: Albert Hall is a massive performing arts center, one of the cultural centers of London high society. The Wendices going there signals their wealth and social position.
- P. 31: Maharajahs were important Indian kings who ruled major states before the establishment of the Indian Republic in 1947. They were often incredibly wealthy and powerful (though they remained subject to British colonial control in most cases). The fact that Tony interacted directly with a Maharajah indicates both his fame as a tennis player and his membership in the British upper crust.
- P. 32: Windsor is a town just outside London, most notable for Windsor Castle, which is a primary residence of the Monarch (which would be Elizabeth II, who took the throne when George VI died in 1952, though her coronation wasn't until 1953). A fashionable town, Windsor's royal associations were more exclusive before the castle was opened to public access in 1992).
- P. 41: Limies is a somewhat derogatory term for British people, generally used by Americans. It's not actively offensive or racist, but it isn't necessarily well received by British people.
- P. 49: The caretaker would be a kind of general handyman who dealt with any maintenance on an upper-class person's house and would make sure it stayed secure if

the owner was travelling. Charwomen were part time cleaners (as opposed to full time, live in maids) who would clean wealthy people's homes for a living.

- P. 59: The Home Secretary is a high-ranking British government official, whose responsibilities include overseeing policing and the administration of justice in England and Wales. The Old Bailey is one of the locations where the Crown Court sits—one of the three most important courts in Britain. People often use the name of the building as shorthand for the court itself.

V. Brief Production History

- *Dial "M" for Murder* began as a television script for BBC Television, first being produced in 1952.
- That same year, the show premiered at London's Westminster Theatre in June and New York's Plymouth Theatre in October.
- In 1954, Alfred Hitchcock directed a successful film version of the play. This is the most famous movie version.
- Numerous other movie versions have been made, including TV movies in 1958, 1968, and 1981. It has been adapted in the Soviet Union in 1981, in India in 1985, 1989, and 2002.