

MURDER AT St. BARNABAS'

A Comedy

by Michael Thomas

SchoolPlay Productions Ltd

MURDER AT ST. BARNABAS'
and DRINK?

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CAST

The Rev. Peter Parsons (deceased)	<i>Simply a body</i>
Mrs. Marbles	<i>Brisk suburban lady, 40s</i>
Det. Insp. Parrot	<i>Slightly crumpled, worn air</i>
Det. Sgt. MaCore	<i>Dapper and confident</i>
Agnes	<i>Ingenue, prettily dressed</i>
Mr. Winstanley	<i>Rather boring man, mid 50s</i>
Mrs. Parsons	<i>Embittered, vicar's wife, 50s</i>

TIME

The present, during the interval in a production of a rather dull, utterly conventional 1930's thriller called 'Murder at St. Barnabas'.

SET

A simple drawing room with sofa, coffee table with a plate of jam tarts and a telephone on a side table. Two entrances, L and R. A downstage area and entrance in front of the curtain will be needed for Mr. Winstanley, and a further area if possible for the two policemen. A sign-board containing the poster with wording as read out by PARROT should be clearly visible to one side front of the curtain.

*The first performance of **MURDER AT St. BARNABAS** took place at Dover Grammar School for Boys on 7th March 1997 with the following cast:*

The Rev. Peter Parsons	Alastair Wilkie
Mrs. Marbles	Hannah Perrin
Det. Insp. Parrot	Andrew Tempest
Det. Sgt. MaCore	Aaron Stoakes
Agnes	Suzie Adkins
Mr. Winstanley	Jamie Towe
Mrs. Parsons	Marie Darrell

MURDER AT ST BARNABAS

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(As the curtain opens we see the final moments of Act 1 of a play called 'Murder at St Barnabas' being performed by the amateur dramatic society. The Rev. Peter PARSONS who is playing the character of Dr. WILSON collapses through the curtain. Mrs. MARBLES comes and stands over him. Immediately we hear the sound of a police siren and a car drawing up, doors being slammed and then footsteps as Det. Insp. Harry PARROT and Sgt. MACORE enter to one side. Upstage Mrs. MARBLES speaks the final line).

Mrs. Marbles: And now - who killed Dr. Wilson, and why?

(Tableau. Sound of applause. Lights go down on them, come up on PARROT and MACORE. PARROT is reading the play poster).

Parrot: Murder at St. Barnabas. Uncanny isn't it. Performed by the St. Barnabas Amateur Dramatic Society. Last night tonight at 7.30. Last night tonight? Last night oh I get it, Last night, tonight, at 7.30. Tickets £4.00 adult, £2.50 children and senior citizens, no dogs allowed. Well, well, well. Funny that, isn't it?

MaCore: What, Chief?

Parrot: The title of the play is also the title of the amateur dramatic society putting it on for the last time tonight.

MaCore: I wonder who wrote it.

Parrot: Why would that matter?

MaCore: If the writer was a member of the society, Chief. Might have been all planned.

Parrot: Detective Sergeant MaCore, that is a very interesting thought.

MaCore: Thank you, Chief.

Parrot: Sometimes you excel yourself.

MaCore: Oh, too kind, Chief.

Parrot: It doesn't say who wrote it.

MaCore: Well, there you are.

Parrot: Where?

MaCore: Trying to conceal their identity. Throw us off the scent.

Parrot: That's a mean trick.

MaCore: Despicable, Chief.

Parrot: I don't know, MaCore, I really don't. I really don't know what this world's coming to.

MaCore: I know how you feel, Chief.

Parrot: I mean, this is it, MaCore. The St. Barnabas Church Hall. Who would have thought it, eh?

MaCore: Who would have thought it, Chief.

Parrot: Who would have thought that behind this calm exterior, this immemorial symbol of English decency

MaCore: Decency

Parrot: Honesty

MaCore: Honesty

Parrot: This bastion of British reliability

MaCore: bility

Parrot: This cradle of morality, this foundation of our fundamental inig ingrit grinit

MaCore: Integrity, Chief.

Parrot: Integrity, Sergeant MaCore. Integrity. That is what it is all about.

MaCore: Is it?

Parrot: We trust these people. They are the common people of England, the good folk, our law-abiding, sensible, plain, honest, no-nonsense citizens who are the envy of less happier lands.

MaCore: Are you sure that's proper English, Chief?

Parrot: It's Shakespeare, Sergeant MaCore.

MaCore: That's all right then.

Parrot: Where would England be without them? Where would we be without them?

MaCore: Err?

Parrot: They are the stuff that has made this country great.

MaCore: Stuff?

Parrot: Holding their bring and buy sales year after year, their coffee mornings, their Scouts and Guides and Brownies

MaCore: I was in the Sea Cadets myself

Parrot: Horticultural Shows with prizes for the best arrangement of gladioli and the biggest marrows in christendom awarded by the elegant wife of the deputy mayor, Youth Clubs, Dog Shows, petty squabbles between Mrs. This and Mrs. That over who is going to provide the committee teas, Mrs. Parsons making jam tarts that nobody can eat

MaCore: Mrs. Parsons, do we know her?

Parrot: She's simply an example, she doesn't exist.

(MACORE takes out his notebook and starts to check through it).

MaCore: Are you sure?

Parrot: Amateur dramatics, raffles, polling booths

MaCore: Politics could be dangerous.

Parrot: Are you listening, MaCore?

MaCore: With you all the way, Chief. Amateur dramatics, raffles

Parrot: I mean this is England. This is the bedrock. This is not the inner city. The people in St. Barnabas Church Hall tonight are not deprived, social rejects living on benefits who have been failed by society, caught in the trap of poverty, drug addiction and homelessness.

MaCore: They certainly are not.

Parrot: They're decent citizens. They respect policemen.

MaCore: Good God.

Parrot: And now, look what has happened. A murder.

MaCore: I know. Terrible. Can't think what the world's coming to. Must be very upsetting for you, Chief.

Parrot: Incredible.

(Pause as PARROT seems lost in his thoughts).

MaCore: If you'd rather sit in the car while I go in and

Parrot: Let me tell you one thing, Sergeant. My name isn't Detective Inspector Harry Parrot for nothing.

MaCore: You're damn right there, Chief.

Parrot: Now pull yourself together, man. I want to warn you, it may be a messy business in there tonight.

MaCore: Mrs. Parsons and the jam tarts you mean.

Parrot: Never mind Mrs. Parsons, she's the least of our worries.

(A scream from MRS. MARBLES and the lights change back to her. She has discovered the body really is dead).

Parrot: Quick man, or we may be too late.

MaCore: But the murder's already happened - we had a call twelve minutes ago.

Mrs. Marbles: Oh my god! It's the vicar, he's dead!

(PARROT and MACORE rush into the set and up onto the stage. Lights down on their area).

Parrot: I beg you to remain calm, madam, I am a detective inspector.

MaCore: Keep calm everybody, there's nothing to worry about.

Marbles: Nothing to worry about? The vicar's dead, and it's only the end of act one. And poor Mrs. Parsons.

MaCore: Mrs. Parsons?

Marbles: Alas, alas! Oh! Oh! Oh! To lose her husband so suddenly.

MaCore: Where might I find this Mrs. Parsons?

Marbles: In the kitchen backstage. She'll be doing the teas. And the jam tarts.

MaCore: I'm going to investigate, Chief. *(Exit upstage R).*

Parrot: Madam, it is my unfortunate duty to ask you some distressing questions.

Marbles: It's all right, Inspector. I was in the Girl Guides. I'm Mildred Marbles, Hon. Secretary of the Society.

Parrot: Detective Inspector Parrot at your service, madam. Tell me when you discovered the body.

Marbles: Just now, this second. I screamed.

Parrot: I see. And what led you to believe that he was dead?

Marbles: The curtains closed at the end of the act, the audience applauded, I said to Peter, well that seemed to go all right, they're enjoying it tonight, good house and nice to see some of the younger ones turning out for a bit of live entertainment oh dear when I noticed that Peter, Mr. Parsons that is, the vicar, was still lying there, acting dead, because you see, he was supposed to be, in the play.

Parrot: *(Scribbling furiously in his notebook).* live entertainment. Yes? He was acting dead.

Marbles: I said, Peter, I said, and I shook him, and he was stiff and cold, his face a horrible grey blue colour, his tongue lolling out like like a dog's, the eyes staring in a frenzy Well look, you can see for yourself.

Parrot: It's all right, madam, I'm a police officer, I'm trained in these matters. I have seen sights, in the pursuance of my duty, madam, that would make a dead man turn in his grave.

Marbles: How terribly brave you must be.

Parrot: All in a day's work. Now let's have a look at him. *(He leans down to look at the dead man, turning him over).* Aaaaaaahhhh!!! It's horrible.

(Enter AGNES, the ingenue, L).

Agnes: Excuse me, Mrs. Marbles, but Mr. Winstanley would like to get on with the raffle, because we're half way through the interval now, and most people have got their coffees. Oh dear, Mr. Parsons looks a bit off colour. Is he all right?

Marbles: He's dead, Agnes.

Agnes: Is he? Oh dear. What a terrible thing. But I can't say I'm surprised. Shall I tell Mr. Winstanley it's all right, then?

Parrot: I want to warn you, madam, that I am a police officer trained in the most advanced methods of modern criminal investigation. Detective Inspector Parrot, St. Barnabas police.

Agnes: Goodness.

Parrot: Where were you at the time of the murder, madam?

Agnes: I don't know, when was it?

Marbles: It must have been between the time the vicar came onto the set at the end of act one and now. He came on, said his line, "I expect you're wondering what this is all about" and I said mine, "I feel sure something dreadful is about to happen" and then he said his line, "Not long, now," picked up a jam tart from that plate on the coffee table and went over to the telephone.

Parrot: Why a jam tart?

Marbles: It's in the script. You see the jam tarts are supposed to have been poisoned. Actually, it's supposed to be sponge cakes, but Mrs. Parsons said her sponge cakes never turn out right, so we'd be safer with jam tarts.

Parrot: Why poisoned?

Marbles: It's the story. Blackmail. Murder. Intrigue. Dr. Wilson eats a jam tart and suddenly falls lifeless to the floor. Then I stand over his body and say: "And now, who killed Dr. Wilson, and why?" and the curtain falls for the end of Act One.

(MR. WINSTANLEY takes up his position downstage in front of curtain with a box of raffle ticket stubs and various prizes).

Winstanley: We're doing the raffle now, and the first prize is the shampoo and scented soap set. And the winning number is blue sixty-five.

(Re-enter MACORE).

MaCore: I tell you, chief, I think there's something very suspicious about that Mrs. Parsons if you ask me. She didn't seem at all surprised her husband was dead. Or upset.

Agnes: Well, that's Mabel for you all over.

Marbles: Agnes! What do you mean?

Agnes: She never really cared about him, the way I did.

Parrot: Now we're getting somewhere.

MaCore: Another thing. We got a call twelve minutes ago that there had been a

murder at the St. Barnabas Church Hall during the performance of a play.

Parrot: I know.

MaCore: Well, Chief, I may be misunderstanding Einstein's theory of Relativity of events in time and space, but how could we get the call twelve minutes before the murder took place?

Parrot: But we don't know when the murder took place. He ate a poisoned jam tart and keeled over.

MaCore: Poisoned jam tart?

Parrot: Not really poisoned. In the play.

MaCore: That still doesn't explain how somebody telephoned us to say he had died when he was still on the stage saying his lines.

Parrot: Unless, they were not telling the truth.

MaCore: Perhaps they had it all planned.

Parrot: You mean

MaCore: Yes

Parrot: Premeditated.

MaCore: Calculated.

Parrot: Cold.

MaCore: Cunning. It makes you sick.

(A moment).

Winstanley: Next prize: A bowl of gladioli, red seventy-two.

Marbles: Perhaps I can help you, inspector. Mrs. Parsons has a mobile phone.

Agnes: I think I ought to make a confession

MaCore: Think carefully before you speak, madam.

Agnes: I must. Peter, Mr. Parsons, and I were having an affair. Last night he said we must stop seeing each other. Mabel had her suspicions. I said I would kill him.

Winstanley: Red seventy-two. Anybody got red seventy-two?

MaCore: And did you?

Agnes: Yes. I stood in the wings and fired a poisoned dart from a blow pipe into his neck. He deserved it.

Parrot: This puts years on me. In a church hall! A vicar!

Marbles: Hell hath no fury, Inspector.

Winstanley: Red seventy-two, red seventy-two: lovely bowl of gladioli.

(Enter MRS. PARSONS from upstage R. She is a stately and very severe woman).

Mrs. Parsons: Inspector, I am Mrs. Parsons. I believe my husband is dead.

Parrot: *(From now on becoming ever more astonished at the turn of events).* That is correct, madam.

Parsons: We had our differences of course. He was, in fact, rather a common man, although in holy orders. An evangelical.

MaCore: *(He has been trying to work out the angle of fire for the blow pipe dart).* I don't get this dart business.

Marbles: Mabel, whether he was an evangelical or not, show some pity. The man's dead.

Parsons: He had none. He ruined my dinner parties. He disparaged my cooking. And then he went chasing after every bit of skirt he could find. At his age.

Agnes: We were in love.

Parsons: Hanging's too good for him. I murdered him, Inspector.

MaCore: You murdered him? But

Agnes: How dare you say that, Mabel, when you know I murdered him.

Parsons: It was the poisoned jam tarts. Rat poison. Because he was a little rat.

Agnes: *(Sobbing and flinging herself on the sofa).* No, I murdered him. I murdered him.

MaCore: *(Examining the body).* Hello, there's something in his pocket. Raffle tickets. Red seventy-two. Red seventy two.

Winstanley: Ah, the vicar. Bowl of gladioli. *(He leaves his spot and brings the bowl on to the stage).*

Parsons: He won't be needing that now. I'll take it.

Winstanley: He's dead then?

Agnes: Of course he's dead. I murdered him.

Parsons: I murdered him.

Agnes: *(Rising with fury).* You heartless harridan. I loved him and I murdered him.

Parsons: You shameless floozy. I hated him and I murdered him.

Winstanley: *(Stepping between them).* Sorry to disappoint you ladies. I'd just about had enough of the Rev. Parsons and his sermons. Boring as hell they were. They said women liked him.

Marbles: He was a charming and courteous man.

Parsons: Philanderer.

Agnes: Coward.

Winstanley: I'd been church warden twenty-seven years. He said we needed a change in the parish. Modernisation. Not having that. Mr. Winstanley, Inspector, pleased to meet you. Nice to meet a real policeman for a change, instead of all these stage detectives who seem to know it all. I do all the electrics for the company, and the raffle. Have done for years. It was a very easy matter to wire up the telephone so that it was live when he touched it. I

murdered him, Inspector.

Agnes: }

Parsons: } You! But that's impossible!!

Marbles: }

Parrot: MaCore!

MaCore: Keep calm, Chief, keep calm! What I still want to know is, who telephoned the police, and why?

Parrot: Don't sound so theatrical, MaCore.

Marbles: I'm afraid I did, sergeant. I borrowed Mrs Parsons' mobile phone when I came offstage in the previous scene. I had this premonition something terrible was about to happen.

Parrot: Put me out of my misery, madam. Did you murder the vicar?

Marbles: No, Inspector. There was no need.

MaCore: And yet the uneaten jam tart is still in the vicar's hand, the blow pipe dart is embedded in the scenery opposite, and the telephone wire is not connected. *(He points out these things and all the heads follow him).* The truth is - nobody murdered the vicar.

Winstanley: }

Agnes: } What?!!!

Parsons: }

Parrot: Help!

Marbles: So how?

MaCore: Auto suggestion.

Parrot: What?

Parsons: }

Agnes: } You mean ?

Winstanley: }

MaCore: Yes. He knew there were three chances he would die, and even though he avoided eating the jam tart, the dart missed and the telephone was disconnected, he convinced himself the end was nigh, and being a good evangelical he just prepared to meet his God , and died anyway.

(Astonished pause).

Marbles: Brilliant, Sergeant.

Parrot: *(He is trying to follow the implications of this).* So, if nobody actually murdered him, but three people have confessed to trying to murder him

MaCore: It's not a police matter at all.

Parrot: Isn't it?

Agnes: I so wanted to kill him.

Parsons: The little rat.

Winstanley: He should have had that shock.

MaCore: I think you can start act two now, Mrs. Marbles.

Marbles: Well Inspector, thank you so much for coming.

Parrot: *(Pulling himself together again)*. Not at all, madam. All part of a day's work. *(To MACORE)*. Shouldn't we arrest somebody or?

MaCore: No need, Chief. Just call in the undertakers.

Parrot: Right. *(He finally convinces himself)*. Right MaCore. Undertakers. Case solved. File closed. Another step on the ladder of success. Evening all. Come on MaCore.

MaCore: Right behind you, Chief.

(PARROT and MACORE exit. Reverse of sound effects of footsteps and their car as they drive away).

Marbles: *(She waits until the car door has slammed, then turns angrily on the others)*. I am surrounded by bungling amateurs. You incompetents had three chances to kill him, and in the end I had to strangle him with my own string of pearls. *(She produces them from under the vicar's body)*. Now, positions for act two if you please. Mr. Winstanley, the lights.

(Black out).

THE END