



COLORADO SPRINGS

Fine Arts Center

at COLORADO COLLEGE

DIAL M FOR MURDER

Study Guide

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DIAL M FOR MURDER

Play Synopsis

Adapted from Frederick Knott's 1953 play of the same name, *Dial M for Murder* follows married couple Tony and Margot Wendice. Although their marriage may look idyllic, all is not to be believed in this well-known murder mystery thriller.

Tony Wendice, a former writer who now works in publishing, suspects his lovely wife Margot of having an affair with one of his writers. In an attempt to gain the upperhand, Tony spins a tangled web of deception, lies, and revenge that can only end in one thing: murder.



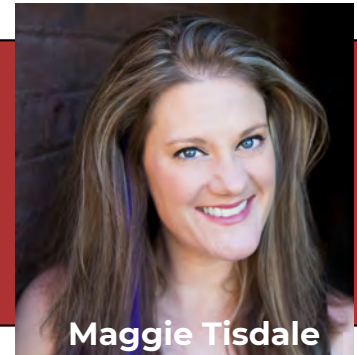
Maggie Tisdale
(Margot Wendice)



Characters

Margot Wendice:

The wealthy wife of Tony Wendice. Although she tries to hide it from her husband, and the world, Margot was unfaithful to her husband. She is charming, kind, and completely unaware of the plan her husband is hatching



Maggie Tisdale



Amaya Egusquiza

Maxine Hadley:

An American crime novelist with an unorthodox way of killing off her characters. As an author, Maxine is working with Tony Wendice. However, Maxine carries a secret in the reality of her relationship with the Wendices.

Tony Wendice:

A publisher with dreams of being a writer. Tony is married to Margot, but he is creating a plan that will alter their futures irreparably. He is charming, charismatic, and thinks he has it all figured out.



Jonas Cohen



Jeff Ronan

Captain Lesgate:

A former schoolmate of Tony Wendice. Lesgate appears to have an issue with his identity, which gets him into some hot water with Tony. His past is less than perfect, and now he must deal with the consequences.

Inspector Hubbard:

A Scotland Yard detective who takes his job quite seriously. Although he may appear to be just an eccentric policeman, there may be more than meets the eye with this investigator.



Brian Landis Folkins



Setting



The London flat owned by the Wendices.
1952.



London, England in the 1950s was just pulling itself out of the immediate post World War II years. The economy had finally started to repair itself, and many would say it was starting to boom. The economic and political disarray following the war stabilized a bit under the return of Winston Churchill as Prime Minister. However, it was the event of the decade that truly brought the nation together: the 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, was televised with millions turning in to watch the spectacle.

As the economy grew and jobs stabilized, families began making large purchases such as homes and cars. To fill those new homes, they began acquiring in-home conveniences such as electric irons and washing machines to ease some of the homemaking burden. To escape the monotony of home, and because travel was previously restricted due to the war, the popularity of packaged vacations, and travel in general, rose. Escapism also drew crowds to the West End, the major London theater district. Audiences were drawn to the golden age of the musical, seeing shows like Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I*, Loesser, Burrows, and Swerling's *Guys and Dolls*, or Wilson's *The Boy Friend*. These shows allowed audiences to leave their realities behind to experience a neat, and usually happy, story ending.



While many British families began vacationing outside of the United Kingdom, immigration also rose during the post-war years. The British Nationality Act of 1948 allowed anyone who was a British subject, having been born in the United Kingdom or a British colony, to be able to settle in the United Kingdom. This influx of people brought with them their diverse cultures and traditions, which in turn greatly influenced the art, music, and literature of the time period and those to come.





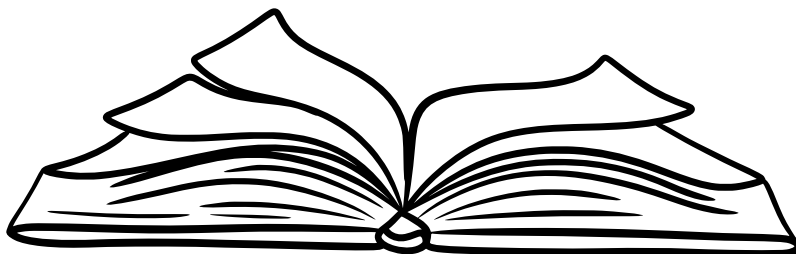
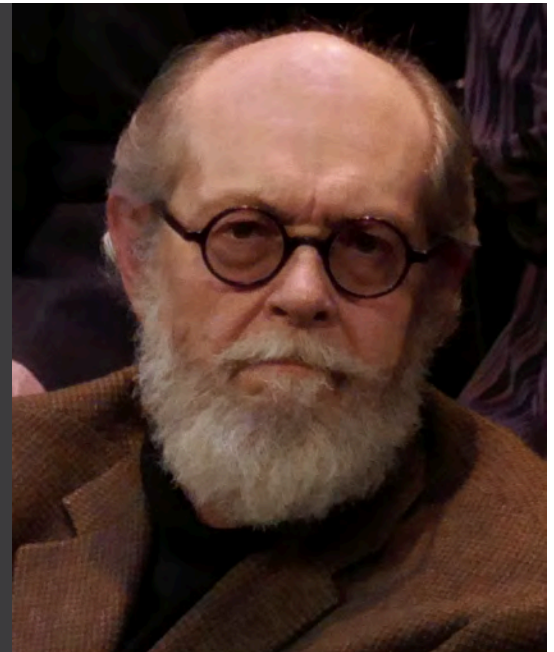
Playwrights



Frederick Knott: Frederick Knott was born in 1916 in Hankow, China to missionary parents, although he was sent back for schooling in England at the age of ten. After completing his schooling at Cambridge, and serving his country in the Royal Artillery during World War II, Knott turned his attention to screenwriting. His idea for a story about a planned murder gone awry came into being in his first play, *Dial M for Murder* in 1952. This play caught the attention of Warner Brothers Pictures and Alfred Hitchcock, who eventually adapted it for the big screen. Knott had other successes in his plays *Write Me a Murder* (1961) and *Wait Until Dark* (1967). Knott passed away in 2002 at the age of 86.

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Jeffrey Hatcher: Jeffrey Hatcher was born in 1957 in Steubenville, Ohio. While Hatcher initially completed an acting degree from Denison University, he eventually turned to playwriting and screenwriting. Hatcher is known for both his original scripts and adaptations that have been produced on both stage and screen. Some of his stage adaptation credits include *Tuesdays with Morrie* (2008), *Never Gonna Dance* (2003), and *The Critic* (2017). Hatcher is also known for his screenwriting credits which include *Stage Beauty* (2004), *The Duchess* (2008), and *Mr. Holmes* (2015).



CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS

Adaptations

The newest adaptation by Jeffery Hatcher has had some updates made to the original script. A simple change is in the profession of Tony Wendice. Although originally a former tennis professional, Hatcher's version has relegated Tony to the lot of the former writer-turned-publisher. To create a stronger complication, Tony Wendice is now the publisher to Maxine Hadley, the American crime novelist. In an effort to up the stakes for the characters, Hatcher played around with the idea of transforming Max Halliday into Maxine Hadley. It was then, he says, that things fell into place with his adaptation. This allowed for bigger secrets, larger problems, and stronger character motives to propel the action of the play. Hatcher was also tasked with adjusting the stage directions to fit a theater-in-the-round, where the audience surrounds the stage in contrast with a traditional proscenium theater, as is seen in the Fine Arts Center.



Maggie Tisdale
(Margot Wendice)

Amaya Egusquiza
(Maxine Hadley)



Dial M for Murder premiered at Westminster Theatre in June of 1952. After a successful run at the Westminster Theatre in London, England, the play made its debut on Broadway at the Plymouth Theatre in October 1952. As the play proved to be successful with audiences, Warner Brothers attained the rights and had playwright Frederick Knott adapt his script for the screen. The film adaptation was directed by the Master of Suspense himself, Alfred Hitchcock, and featured Grace Kelly as Margot Wendice, Ray Milland as Tony Wendice, and Robert Cummings as Max Halliday. The film received positive reviews, and was considered well-received by audiences.



Maggie Tisdale
(Margot Wendice)

Jeff Ronan
(Captain Lesgate)

The Murder Mystery Genre

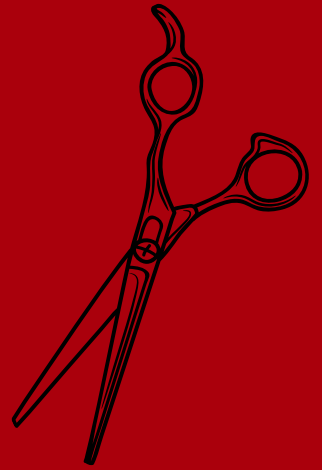
Though many authors are considered to be giants of the genre, few stand out more than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Taking up where Poe left off, in 1887 Conan Doyle created a logical detective named Sherlock Holmes who uses his powers of deduction and observation to solve crimes that often appear to be completely unsolvable, even to the masterminds at Scotland Yard. Stories such as “The Scarlet Ibis,” “The Speckled Band,” and “The Hound of the Baskervilles” continue to captivate audiences with their intricacies to this day.

The genre of mystery, or murder mystery, has been a part of literature for so many years that people have a difficult time pinpointing its origin. Although some point to the genre’s origin as the tale “The Three Apples” from One Thousand and One Nights, most believe that the genre truly took form with Edgar Allan Poe’s 1841 tale, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In Poe’s short story, a detective is able to solve the baffling mystery surrounding the deaths of two women in Paris. Considered to be the first “detective story,” this well-known short story set the stage for later literary geniuses with his use of a single detective logically working through clues to solve a mystery.



Maggie Tisdale (Margot Wendice)

Brian Landis Folkins (Inspector Hubbard)



However, it was the early twentieth century that ushered in the golden age of detective fiction. Masterful authors such as Ruth Sayers and Raymond Chandler thrilled audiences with a “whodunit” style of writing. It was Agatha Christie, however, who carved a name for herself as the Queen of Crime. Christie created strong detectives in Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot to solve her tightly-knit mysteries. Her use of red herrings and the locked door mystery drew readers to her writing. Novels such as *Murder on the Orient Express* and *And Then There Were None* are enduring examples of her lasting legacy on the murder mystery genre..

The popularity of the murder mystery or detective novel did not diminish over the course of the twentieth century. Daphne de Maurier’s 1938 novel *Rebecca* thrilled audiences with its dark themes and gothic feel. Patricia Highsmith played on the unpredictability of human nature when she created a series of psychological novels in 1955 featuring the rather remorseless Mr. Tom Ripley. These novels mark a turn of the genre when authors started to focus on the nature of the perpetrator, rather than showcasing the deductive logic behind solving a mystery.

With all these foundational short stories and novels in place, it is no wonder that the murder mystery genre is still around today. Although the genre may have shifted a bit from the original detective story, many would argue that the thriller, murder mystery, and true crime are currently some of the most consumed media today. Many popular podcasts, documentaries, novels, television series, and even plays like *Dial M for Murder* continue to thrill and delight audiences with the twists, turns, and insights into crime and human nature.



Themes

Gender Roles

The original script of *Dial M for Murder* sees the character of Margot Wendice as a stereotypical woman of London in the 1950s. Although from a wealthy family, and therefore the recipient of an inheritance, Margot is still socially dependent on her husband Tony. The idea of a woman having an affair was socially unthinkable when

women were stereotypically focused on the ideals of home and husband. Margot's relationship with Max was a taboo, which made it apparent that Tony would want to seek retribution for the act.

However, with Hatcher's adaptation, Margot has not only had an affair, which was unacceptable at the time, she has had an affair with a woman. This was something that would be imperative to keep under wraps for a woman of Margot's societal standing, and reveals an understanding of why she might be so desperate to retrieve her stolen



Amaya Egusquiza (Maxine Hadley) Jonas Cohen (Tony Wendice) Maggie Tisdale (Margot Wendice)

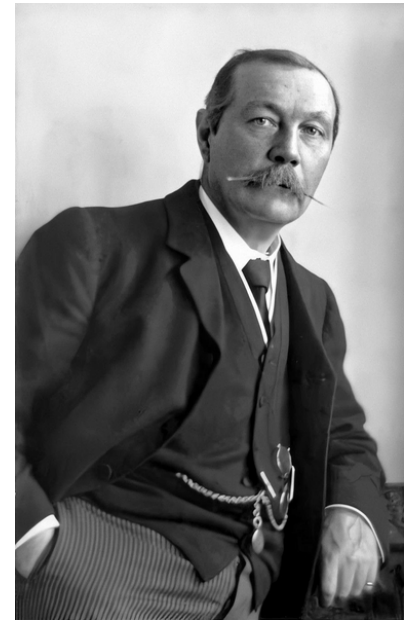
letters. However, Hatcher's adaptation not only allows Margot to demonstrate an exploration of the depths of her sexual identity, it also creates moments of autonomy for Margot as well. Instead of using Margot as a typical beautiful woman in danger, Hatcher allows her actions and dialogue to illustrate that she is more than just a woman with a pretty face. Essentially, Hatcher creates a space for Margot to showcase the strength of a woman in the 1950s, rather than simply portray a stereotype.

The Perfect Crime



Maggie Tisdale
(Margot Wendice)

Many literary works are obsessed with creating the perfect crime. One need only look at the extensive literary catalog of Agatha Christie or pull up a queue of Netflix documentaries to see the validity of that statement. Like many before him, Frederick Knott toyed with the idea of the perfect crime gone awry with his two most well-known plays, *Dial M for Murder* and *Wait Until Dark*. Although the crime eventually is revealed to be less than perfect, the would-be murderer is fully convinced of its flawless nature.



In *Dial M for Murder*, Tony Wendice fully believes that he has concocted the perfect crime. He has planned out all the details well in advance of the actual murder date, he has orchestrated each move perfectly, and created an airtight alibi.



Jonas Cohen
(Tony Wendice)

Jeff Ronan
(Captain Lesgate)

All the puzzle pieces are put in place for Tony's crime to go off without a hitch. Yet it becomes clear to the audience as the plan unfolds that Tony did not plan for the one wild card that could jeopardize his entire plan: human nature. The complication of human individuality and free will highlights a lesson learned by many who try to stage the "perfect crime," that even though a plan may exist, there is no such thing as perfection.



Pre-Performance Questions

1. Have you seen or read the play *Dial M for Murder* before? What are your expectations for this production at the Fine Arts Center?
2. Is it possible to commit a crime and not get caught? Essentially, is it possible to plan a perfect crime? Or, will criminals always get caught in the end? Why?
3. What role does trust play in a relationship? How important is it to be able to completely trust another person? Why?



Amaya Egusquiza (Maxine Hadley) Maggie Tisdale (Margot Wendice)

Post-Performance Questions

1. The original production of Hatcher's adaptation of *Dial M for Murder* was staged in the round, meaning the audience surrounded the stage. How might that have changed events seen on the stage?
2. Did any of the characters trust each other? If so, who? Did trust, or lack thereof, play any part in the planning and commission of the crime?
3. What might have happened if Tony's plan had gone perfectly? Do you think his crime would ever have been found out? Why or why not?
4. How does this play comment on the stereotypical gender roles of the time period? Was this production able to overcome any of those stereotypes?
5. Do you believe that justice was achieved in the end? Did everyone who deserved a consequence for their actions receive one? Or was justice unfairly doled out?