

The Case of the Music Guild Murders



John Donald O'Shea

Norman Maine Publishing

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Norman Maine Publishing
P.O. Box 1400
Tallevast, FL 34270

*I would like to thank three people
who have greatly helped me
to develop as a playwright.*

*First, I would like to thank Judy Tumbleson
who acted as my producer
when a primitive version of this play was first produced.*

*I would also like to thank C. M.
who taught me not to be afraid
to rewrite and hone my plays again and again.*

*Finally, I'd like to thank D. R.
who was kind enough to explain to me
that although a work might be very good,
a publisher still might reject it
because at that particular moment in time
the publisher might not need that sort of play.*

*Together they have taught me,
that if I believe in my play,
to hone, rework and submit it
until it's good enough to interest a publisher.*

The Case of the Music Guild Murders

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The River City Music Guild Murders was first performed at Edison Junior High School, Rock Island, IL, on October 21-22, 2004: Judy Tumbleson, producer; John Donald O'Shea, director.

HARRY BOGART: Tanner Williams

CHARLIE FRIDAY: Jake Ramey

MOLLIE LAWRENCE: Julie Eagle

MARTIN HOWARD "HAWKS" PITT: Ben Simkins

JUNE PITT: Taylor VerMeer

ABBY GROVE: Javan Kaiser

RICHARD "HAMLET" BURTON: Jameson Clark

MEG FRANK: Tara VandyGriff

MINDY STITCHER: Amy Booker

DONALD FELLER: Alex Davis

SALLY MILLER: Caitriona McGrath Nagle

PAMELA HEARTBURN: Beth Greenwood

The Case of the Music Guild Murders

FARCE/MURDER-MYSTERY. It's been a tough year for the River City Music Guild. Two directors have been murdered and now the body of a third director has been found poisoned, stabbed, strangled, and shot. The police chief and his detective soon narrow down the murder suspects to those with the motive and opportunity to commit the murder—the Music Guild's stable of sopranos!

Performance Time: Approximately 30 minutes.

Characters

(2 M, 3 F)

NICK TRACEY: Chief of police; serious and competent.

MIKE O'HARA: Disheveled detective in the mode of Humphrey Bogart or Peter Falk.

KATHERINE HEARTBURN: Actress who closely resembles Katherine Hepburn doing a screwball comedy.

MARIAN MONROE: Beautiful actress; Marilyn Monroe clone—built, blond and dumb.

GERTRUDE TORRENTS: Gertrude Lawrence type actress—beautiful, talented, bitchy.

Setting

Police station, office of the police chief.

Synopsis of Scenes

Prologue: Stage of the Music Guild Theatre played before the curtain.

Scene 1: Police Chief's office.

Scene 2: Police Chief's office, later that day.

Props

2 Desk chairs	Keys
Desk	Note
Phone	Wheelchair
Watch, for O'Hara	Bandages
Watch, for Heartburn	Handcuffs
Newspaper	2 Handguns
Newspaper clipping	2 Gun holsters

Sound Effects

Rattling cardboard box being dropped	Gunshots
Door opening	Locking sound

“I wonder if this is what
Irving Berlin meant
when he said,
“There’s no business
like show business.”

—Chief

Prologue

(AT RISE: The stage of the Music Guild Theatre. Only the ghost light is on. The stage is empty. From backstage we hear a rattling cardboard box being dropped and then a door opening.)

VOICE: *(Offstage.)* Is that you, George? *(No response.)*
George? *(No response.)* I'm sorry. I thought you were
George. What's on your mind? *(Pause.)* That looks very
real. I hope that's only a prop. No!

(Six shots are heard in rapid succession. Silence. Blackout.)

Scene 1

(AT RISE: The office of the Chief of Police. The Chief is at his desk. There is a chair opposite his desk.)

CHIEF: *(Into phone.)* Suzy, send in O'Hara.

(Mike O'Hara enters.)

O'HARA: You wanted to see me, Chief?

CHIEF: Sit down, Mike. *(O'Hara sits.)* I was listening to the radio on the way in. They say we've got another murder on our hands.

O'HARA: Some guy, if you can believe it, named Heavensent...Chisholm Heavensent. We found the body floating in the lagoon out by the Music Guild.

CHIEF: No doubt stamped, "Return to sender."

O'HARA: Is that supposed to be funny, Chief?

CHIEF: Sorry. This job's getting to me. Another director?

O'HARA: Yeah, "The King and I," I think.

CHIEF: That's the second one this year...

O'HARA: Actually, if you count the winter show, this is number three, Chief.

CHIEF: I wonder if this is what Irving Berlin meant when he said, "There's no business like show business."

O'HARA: Is that another joke, Chief?

CHIEF: What was the cause of death this time...poison, stabbing, strangulation...gunshots?

O'HARA: Yeah, all of the above. How'd you know? We found him floating face down with a half-dozen shiv wounds in his back and an extension cord wrapped around his neck. He was shot at least six times, and the medical examiner found rat poison in his stomach.

CHIEF: Did he have any enemies?

O'HARA: Not as far as we know. Just friends.

CHIEF: At the Music Guild, that can be worse.

O'HARA: Yeah, or even fatal.

CHIEF: Any possibility this was a suicide?

O'HARA: Not a chance. The reviews were all good. *(Picks up newspaper.)* Listen to this. *(Reads.)* "Chisholm Heavensent has once again presented the people of the Quad Cities with a wonderful gift. Heavensent's "The King and I" opened last night at the River City Music Guild, and it was terrific..."

CHIEF: Any leads?

O'HARA: Nothing hard. But my gut tells me it was a soprano.

CHIEF: Why not the tenor?

O'HARA: If it was a tenor, we'd have found the soprano in the lagoon. No, Chief, I can feel it in my bones. It was a soprano.

CHIEF: Where do you start?

O'HARA: With auditions.

CHIEF: You're crazy! Who in their right mind is going to audition to be arrested for murder?

O'HARA: With Heavensent's audition, Chief. The last two directors murdered were done in by aging ingénues passed over at casting.

CHIEF: Got any suspects?

O'HARA: Yeah, I got two coming in this morning. *(Looks at his watch.)* Sorry, Chief, but I gotta run. I was scheduled to interview a Miss Katherine Heartburn five minutes ago.

CHIEF: I'd like to sit in. Do it here.

O'HARA: Sure thing, boss.

(Chief picks up the phone.)

CHIEF: Suzy, send in Katherine Heartburn.

(Katherine Heartburn enters.)

CHIEF: Good morning, Miss Heartburn. We're delighted you could come in. Sorry for any inconvenience. I'm Chief Nick Tracy, and this is Detective Sergeant O'Hara.

HEARTBURN: Did you know that I just locked my keys in the car? But, of course, you didn't know. How ever could you? I don't suppose you could help me get in. If you can't, do you have a burglar handy?

O'HARA: Miss Heartburn, we wanted to talk to you about—

HEARTBURN: If I can't get them out, I don't know what I'll do. Did you know I have to be at the tennis club... (*Looks at her watch.*) ...in 40 minutes? But then, how could you know? Will your burglar be able to open the door without breaking the window?

O'HARA: Miss Heartburn, do you know a fellow named Heavensent...Chisholm Heavensent?

HEARTBURN: I fail to see why that is any of your business. Heaven knows, I don't run around asking you about which women you know.

CHIEF: Miss Heartburn, I think you misunderstand—

HEARTBURN: No, you misunderstand. Who I know, and who I do not know, is my concern, not yours.

O'HARA: (*Getting frustrated.*) Lady, this is a police investigation. We're not asking you to kiss and tell. We're simply asking if you ever met him in a professional capacity.

HEARTBURN: "Professional capacity?" Mr. O'Hara, I don't know what exactly you're implying, but I think I should be highly insulted. If you can't comport yourself like a gentleman, I'm afraid I'll have to leave. But then, of course, I can't leave. I've locked my keys in my car. Did I tell you I've locked my keys in my car?

CHIEF: Madam, we are not suggesting that you met him in your "professional capacity." We meant, did you know him in his "professional capacity"?

HEARTBURN: Chisholm Heavensent had no professional capacity.

O'HARA: Let's start over again. Are you familiar with a Chisholm Heavensent? He served in the capacity of director at the Music Guild.

HEARTBURN: I am most certainly aware of an individual bearing that title. Of course, he has no capacity to direct whatsoever. You've heard the old saying, "If you can't act, direct." I suppose you think I murdered him?

O'HARA/CHIEF: (*Pouncing.*) How did you know he was murdered?

HEARTBURN: You mean to say you didn't know? I would have thought you'd keep up with things like that. No wonder you can't find a burglar.

O'HARA: We know he was murdered. The question is how did you know?

HEARTBURN: Why, I guess I heard it on the radio as I was coming in. Now that I know that you know that I know, can I go? If you don't have a burglar handy—or perhaps, I should say a handy burglar—do you at least have a burglar tool?

CHIEF: Miss Heartburn, did you murder Chisholm Heavensent?

HEARTBURN: Now why ever would I do that? Chisholm was one of my dearest friends. It's true he was a dreadful director. But one doesn't kill a man for that.

O'HARA: That's very reassuring.

HEARTBURN: One should, of course, but one doesn't.

O'HARA: And why doesn't one?

HEARTBURN: Isn't it obvious? If word gets about you've killed your last director, the other directors simply won't cast you. The murder of just one director can ruin your entire career!

O'HARA: You auditioned for the role of "Anna," did you not?

HEARTBURN: Why, of course, I did.

CHIEF: And you were terribly disappointed when Chisholm cast Gertrude Torrents instead of you. Isn't that right?

HEARTBURN: I suppose you could say I was somewhat disappointed.

O'HARA: You've never liked Miss Torrents, have you?

HEARTBURN: That's not true. We were dearest friends. She's a darling person. Unfortunately, she can neither sing nor act.

O'HARA: Nevertheless, she got the role you wanted. I suggest that you killed Chisholm Heavensent for revenge!

HEARTBURN: That's utterly absurd. Chisholm and I were dearest friends. Your suggestion that I would stab one of my dearest friends in the back is ridiculous.

O'HARA/CHIEF: (*Pouncing.*) How did you know he was stabbed in the back?

HEARTBURN: Did I say "stabbed in the back"? My mistake. It was just a figure of speech, I suppose. That's really very funny. I never once considered stabbing him in the back.

CHIEF: But you have thought of killing him?

HEARTBURN: Not really killing him, just...you know...wrapping my hands, or perhaps an extension cord, around his neck and squeezing a little. Chisholm was incredibly pompous. He could be a most infuriating man. But I certainly didn't kill him. (*Checks watch.*) Jeepers, I've got to go. Can one of you get me into my car?

CHIEF: If you didn't kill him, can you think of anyone who might have?

HEARTBURN: If I were a detective, which of course I'm not—in fact, I've never been able to understand why anyone would want to be around criminals all the time—I'm not sure where I should start, except maybe with a soprano.

O'HARA: Any particular soprano?

HEARTBURN: Gertrude Torrents or Marian Monroe, of course.

CHIEF: But you just said you and Ms. Torrents were dearest friends.

HEARTBURN: Marian's a dearest friend, too. But you see, love, they're both sopranos.

O'HARA: That, madam, is why we started with you.

HEARTBURN: Then it should be obvious to you that you have made a mistake. I am not a soprano. I'm a mezzo. Ta-ta. *(She exits.)*

CHIEF: O'Hara, tell one of the boys to get a lock jock, and get her in. *(Calls after her.)* Don't leave town, Miss Heartburn. *(To O'Hara.)* Who's next?

O'HARA: A Ms. Marian Monroe.

CHIEF: *(Into phone.)* Suzy, if there's a Marian Monroe out there, show her in. *(Ms. Monroe enters.)* Good morning, Ms. Monroe.

MONROE: *(To Chief.)* Hi ya, sweetie. Hey, you're cute. Kinda grungy, but cute. *(Indicating O'Hara.)* Hey, he looks like that detective guy on TV...you know, that Christopher Columbus guy.

O'HARA: Ms. Monroe, we'd like to ask you a few questions.

MONROE: Sure, why not? Shoot!

CHIEF: Did you know a guy named Chisholm Heavensent?

MONROE: Sure thing. He's dead, isn't he?

O'HARA: Why do you say that, Ms. Monroe?

MONROE: We had a date last night. He didn't show up.

CHIEF: I don't understand?

MONROE: Look, sweetie, when a guy has a date with me, he shows up unless he's dead.

O'HARA: Why's that?

MONROE: *(To Chief, indicating O'Hara.)* Is he dead, too?

CHIEF: Then you were pretty good friends with him...

MONROE: Yeah, you could say that. He couldn't keep his hands off me.

O'HARA: We hear he had the same problem with plenty of other women.

MONROE: Not after he met me, he didn't.

CHIEF: Then you were in love with him...

MONROE: You gotta be kidding!

CHIEF: Was he in love with you?

MONROE: He told me he was, but anyone would have told you that Chisholm Heavensent's true love was Chisholm. Did you ever go out with a guy and spend the whole evening watching him admire himself in a mirror?

O'HARA: No, I can't say that I have.

HEARTBURN: Well, that was Chisholm. He could live without women, but not without mirrors!

O'HARA: You don't seem very upset about his death.

MONROE: So he *is* dead. Who murdered him?

O'HARA: We thought maybe it was you.

MONROE: Hey, wait a minute. That's not fair! Why are you trying to pin it on me?

CHIEF: You did audition for the role of "Anna" in the "The King and I," did you not?

MONROE: You bet, sweetie.

CHIEF: Did you get the role?

MONROE: No...hey, hold on a second! You think I killed him because I didn't get the role?

O'HARA: Ms. Monroe, we have several witnesses who will testify that they heard you say, "you'd kill for the role."

MONROE: Hey, wait a minute. That was just theater talk. You know, like "break a leg." I didn't shoot him.

CHIEF/O'HARA: (*Pouncing.*) How did you know he'd been shot?

(Monroe is stunned for a second.)

MONROE: Just a lucky guess, I guess. Besides, if I were going to "kill for the role," I'd have killed Gertrude Torrents, not Chisholm.

O'HARA: Which brings us to the subject of Miss Torrents. Did you know Chisholm and Gertrude Torrents had been spending a lot of time together after rehearsals?

MONROE: Do I look like the jealous type?

O'HARA: I don't know what you look like.

MONROE: *(To Chief, indicating O'Hara.)* See, I told you he's dead!

O'HARA: I submit, Ms. Monroe, that when Chisholm began seeing Torrents, you became insanely jealous, and you killed him.

MONROE: Open your peepers, honey. How long do you think I need to find a replacement? I never cared about Chisholm Heavensent. He was incapable of loving anybody but himself. I dated him for one reason: I wanted "Anna."

O'HARA: And when you didn't get it, you felt betrayed. So you murdered him, didn't you?

MONROE: Look, I wanted the role. It's a great role. But it's a mezzo role. I'm a soprano.

CHIEF: Did Chisholm know that?

MONROE: Are you kidding? If he had, why would he have cast Gertrude Torrents? Chisholm wouldn't know a soprano from a saxophone. That's why I went out with him. I figured if I was a good girl, I'd get the role.

CHIEF: But if you're a soprano, why would you want a mezzo role?

MONROE: So Kate Heartburn couldn't have it.

CHIEF: But she said you and she were dearest friends.

MONROE: She lied. We haven't even spoken since "Showboat."

CHIEF: What happened in "Showboat"?

MONROE: I was "Magnolia." Opening night I got a touch of food poisoning, and I collapsed ten minutes before the performance. They took me to the hospital. But the show had to go on. Kate knew most of my lines and my songs, so she filled in. Two days later when I came back, she insisted on hanging onto my role. *(Out of the blue.)* Hey, you don't suppose Kate gave me poison, do you?

O'HARA: If you'd like, we will investigate that next.

CHIEF: Go on, Miss Monroe.

MONROE: Chisholm was the director. He sided with me. Katherine was livid and hasn't spoken to me since. She was also furious with Chisholm.

O'HARA: And now when Heartburn auditions for "Anna," he passes her over, and gives the mezzo role to a soprano.

MONROE: That's about it. Hey, look, I didn't love him, but I didn't kill him.

O'HARA: Then "who done it," as they say in the theater?

CHIEF: Yes, who do you think did it?

MONROE: My guess would be either Kate or Gertrude.

CHIEF: Kate because of "Showboat" and being passed over for "Anna." Why Gertrude?

MONROE: They had a terrible row opening night over her costume. There was a big audience and the reviewers were there. She had a hoop skirt, and she kept tripping over the bottom hoop. Chisholm promised to have the costumer fix it. But that wasn't good enough. She screamed she wanted it fixed now! Chisholm told her he couldn't sew. So she stormed out of the theater. I saw her two weeks later, and she was still mad. She said she felt like giving him rat poison. Can I get out of here now? I've got to get to aerobics.

O'HARA: All right, Ms. Monroe. Just keep in touch.

(Monroe exits.)

CHIEF: Well, O'Hara, sounds like we'd better get Gertrude Torrents in.

O'HARA: Why don't you see if Suzy can find her in the phonebook?

CHIEF: *(Into phone.)* Suzy, see if you can find a Gertrude Torrents in the phonebook...What?...What do you mean she's here?

(Gertrude Torrents bursts through the door doing her best Gertrude Lawrence.)

TORRENTS: Oh, gawd, love, I hope I'm not late. Be a darling and tell old Gerty what she's auditioning for?

CHIEF: Pardon me?

TORRENTS: I'm here for auditions, darling. I'm certainly not about to let Kate and Marian get any role by default.

O'HARA: *(To Chief.)* Crazy, huh?

CHIEF: *(To O'Hara.)* I will never doubt you again!

O'HARA: Look, lady, this is a police station, not a theater. We're not casting a play. We're trying to solve a murder. Win this audition, and you get the electric chair.

TORRENTS: How simply divine. Tell me, darling, who was murdered? Did I know him?

O'HARA: A Chisholm Heavensent. Know him?

TORRENTS: Of course I knew him. Thank gawd it wasn't someone important.

CHIEF: Someone important?

TORRENTS: Like a scene designer. Do you know, darling, how hard it is to find a good scene designer. Directors are a dime a dozen.

O'HARA: I get the feeling you didn't like him a whole lot?

TORRENTS: Don't be absurd, darling. I simply adored him. We were dearest friends.

O'HARA: We've got a witness who tells us you wanted to give him rat poison.

TORRENTS: Of course, darling. He was a man. And like any man, Chisholm could be a real rat. But I absolutely adored him.

O'HARA: Why's that?

TORRENTS: All the women worshipped him—almost as much as he worshipped himself. That's what made him so infuriating. That's why every woman he ever met wanted to kill him at one time or another. No woman can tolerate a man who worships himself.

O'HARA: More than her?

TORRENTS: Precisely.

CHIEF: Is that why you killed him?

TORRENTS: Don't be silly, darling. Chisholm simply adored me. Why would I kill him? He had just given me the role of "Anna."

O'HARA: We hear you had a row over a costume?

TORRENTS: Darling, you simply don't understand actresses. We're always screaming at somebody. It was Marian Monroe who told you about the fight, wasn't it?

CHIEF: We make it a practice to protect our sources.

TORRENTS: If I were you, and thank gawd I'm not, I'd question Marian Monroe. She was furious when Chisholm began stopping off with me for a drink after rehearsals. She's not used to being dumped. Or even Kate—

CHIEF: Kate Heartburn?

TORRENTS: Yes, Kate Heartburn. She wanted "Anna." She was a mezzo. It was a mezzo role. She threw herself at him. She felt she was entitled to the role after how he had treated her in "Showboat." Of course, she never had any hope of acting the part. That's why he gave it to me, darling.

CHIEF: Are you certain that she was angry?

TORRENTS: Not angry. She was livid. I don't know how many times I heard her say she'd like to ring his neck.

O'HARA: Did she mean it?

TORRENTS: Why, of course she did. The only question, darling, is whether she had the guts to do it. How did he die? *(No answer.)* He was strangled, wasn't he, darling? *(No answer.)*

O'HARA: Why isn't the only question whether you had the guts?

TORRENTS: Don't be absurd, love. I was Chisholm's leading lady both on and off the stage. What possible motive did I have to kill him? Moreover, darling, I abhor the sight of blood.

O'HARA: You don't deny you were screaming at him over the bottom hoop of your skirt?

TORRENTS: You can't be serious, darling. If I was going to murder anyone over a skirt, it would have been the idiot who did costumes!

CHIEF: So you would admit that some murders in the theater are permissible?

TORRENTS: Do I, darling? *(Pause. Thinks.)* Yes, love, I suppose I do.

O'HARA: Just when is it permissible to bump off a director, ma'am?

TORRENTS: I've always, of course, considered the murder of a director to be the actor's last recourse. If undertaken for less than compelling reasons, the other directors won't understand. That can prejudice you at subsequent auditions.

O'HARA: Then, too, I suppose that a life term in the slammer may enter into your equation?

TORRENTS: Certainly, darling. If you're behind bars, you wouldn't be able to get to auditions. Well, you'll have to excuse me, darling. I've got 15 minutes to get to auditions at the Circa Dinner Theatre... *(She exits.)*

CHIEF: Well, what do you make of it, Mike?

O'HARA: Let me spell it out for you, Chief. First, ya got this Heartburn dame. She's a mezzo, passed over for a mezzo role that she wanted real bad. She sees her role given to a soprano...a soprano who can't sing or act. She's mad, real mad. So like any normal prima donna, she follows the reasonable course. She kills the director.

CHIEF: Doesn't that seem like a bit of an overreaction?

O'HARA: Maybe for a baritone, but not for a soprano. Ya gotta remember, this is the same Heartburn who rescued Heavensent and "Showboat" when Monroe dropped, and the same dame who was unceremoniously dumped by Heavensent the minute Monroe came back. Then, too, do you really believe she just happened to guess he was stabbed in the back and strangled?

CHIEF: You're right, Mike. She had a motive. And it's hard to believe she just guessed how he got it, if she wasn't involved.

O'HARA: On the other hand, she did not seem to know he was also shot and poisoned.

CHIEF: Maybe she was just playing dumb. *(Pause.)* Or then again, maybe she wasn't.

O'HARA: That dame may be dingy, but she ain't dumb.

CHIEF: Do you think there's any chance it could have been Monroe?

O'HARA: She had an even better motive. Good-looking broads don't like getting dumped. And she got dumped real good.

CHIEF: And for a less attractive woman.

O'HARA: I don't know about that, Chief. Monroe's a real good-looker, but that Torrents dame's got real class. Some guys—especially guys who see themselves as being intellectual types—prefer class.

CHIEF: Don't forget, Monroe wanted the role, too. We know she said she'd kill for it.

O'Hara: Probably just theater talk. Logically speaking, if you're gonna kill to get a part, it makes more sense to knock off the competition. If you kill the director, how's he gonna cast you?

CHIEF: But how did she know he was dead? And that he'd been shot?

O'HARA: I don't know yet. We're missing something. *(Picks up the review and tosses it back down in disgust.)* And I think it's something right under our noses.

CHIEF: Just the same, I'm putting my money on Monroe.

O'HARA: Why's that?

CHIEF: Monroe had a stronger motive to seek revenge. Heartburn was dumped on stage. Monroe got it in real life.

O'HARA: Yeah, perhaps, but sopranos aren't always that logical. With theater types, a good detective keeps all his options open. **[END OF FREEVIEW]**