

MURDER NEXT DOOR

A COMEDY-THRILLER IN ONE ACT

By Whitney Ryan Garrity

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SYNOPSIS: Miranda Belgraves is almost done with her latest novel. With two pages to go, she's impeded by aspiring writer, Bertie Trask, and her besotted son, Rory. She ushers out the neighbors only to be paid a visit by her estranged husband, Sam. When Sam, revolver in hand, expresses his anger with Miranda's plans for a divorce, Miranda realizes that she may not live long enough to finish those last two pages.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(TWO MEN, TWO WOMEN)

MIRANDA BELGRAVESA successful mystery writer, attractive and intelligent; 30's (63 lines.)

BERTIE TRASKMiranda's intrusive neighbor, jovial and chatty; 50's (32 lines.)

RORY TRASKBertie's son, handsome but not very bright; 20's (14 lines.)

SAM BELGRAVESMiranda's estranged husband, angry and jealous; 40's (32 lines.)

Setting

The cottage home of Sam and Miranda Belgraves, Maidstone, England

Time

An autumn evening, the present

PROP LIST

- Typewriter (pre-set on desk)
- Sheet of paper (pre-set in typewriter)
- Manuscript -*Murder in the Garden* (pre-set on desk)
- Glass of wine (pre-set on desk)
- "Love note" paper (RORY)
- Coffee mug w/ sugar (BERTIE)

- Manuscript - - Bertie's (pre-set on bookcase)
- Pencil (BERTIE)
- Book (pre-set on bookcase)
- Cell phone (SAM)
- Gun (SAM)
- Cigarettes (SAM)
- Lighter (SAM)
- Ruler (pre-set in desk drawer)
- Cookie tin with cookies (RORY)
- Ring of keys (SAM)
- Letter opener (pre-set on desk)
- Gun (RORY)

COSTUMES

MIRANDA:

Cream-colored long-sleeve silk blouse, brown slacks, orange print scarf with brooch, brown flats, gold jewelry

BERTIE:

Purple print house dress, pink apron w/ pocket, hosiery, sensible black shoes

RORY:

Black tank top t-shirt with Kiss™ logo, green striped pajama bottoms, white crew socks, tan work boots

Change to: White long-sleeve dress shirt, garish multi-colored tie, jeans

SAM:

Black turtleneck, gray v-neck sweater, charcoal trousers, black socks, black boots, yellow rain slicker

“There is no den in the wide world to hide a rogue. Commit a crime and the earth is made of glass.” *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Murder Next Door was produced by C.A.T.S. Playhouse (Children and Adults Theatrical Studios) in Lubbock, TX - December, 2008. It ran three weeks, as a curtain-raiser for the play *Alibis* by Peter Kennedy (also represented by HEUER), with the following cast:

MIRANDA BELGRAVES Constance Schmitz-Mousavi
BERTIE TRASK Mackenzie Mealem
RORY TRASK Michael Hines
SAM BELGRAVES Cameron Kowolski

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SETTING:

A large desk is down stage right, a chair behind it. A loveseat is positioned STAGE LEFT, a coffee table stands in front of it, a small table with a lamp is set on the left side of the loveseat. The STAGE RIGHT wall contains a tall, wide bookcase displaying numerous books. There is a closet door between the bookcase and the doorway. The stage left wall contains two large, draped windows. A window seat is beneath the windows. Framed artwork of MIRANDA's novels decorates the walls.

AT RISE:

The lights fade up to reveal the study in the home of SAM and MIRANDA BELGRAVES. The upstage wall contains two arched doorways, the left leads into the living room and foyer, the right leads into the kitchen and pantry.

At present, MIRANDA BELGRAVES is seated at the desk, in front of her typewriter. SHE is an attractive woman, in HER 30's. A stack of paper representing a manuscript is set beside the typewriter, a full glass of wine beside it. A telephone is positioned on the other side of the typewriter. The phone rings once more and MIRANDA answers it.

The voice of MIRANDA BELGRAVES is heard - - panicked, hysterical - - from the darkness.

MIRANDA: *Help! Someone, help me! He's killing me! Murder . . . murder! Someone please - - (MIRANDA is cut off abruptly by the sound of a phone ringing. MIRANDA now sounds annoyed.) Oh, drat! (Into phone.)*

Hello? Oh, hello, Marty. Yes, I'm working out the last few pages right now. Now, Marty you know that I can't tell you anything about it until I'm ready to send the manuscript. (*Standing.*) No, sorry. Not even the title. (*Patting the manuscript affectionately.*) But I will say that I think this one is even better than *Murder in the Kitchen*. Any more word on that movie deal? Oh. Well, he's not my first choice to play Derek, but at least he dies pretty early on. Yes, Marty. I promise not to say anything derogatory about the casting in print. You know me, the soul of tact . . . from now on! (*Laughs.*) Pardon? No . . . (*Evasively.*) No, Sam isn't here. He's . . . he's out of town for the weekend. No, no, everything's fine. Now, if you want your 10% of my next bestseller, you had better let me finish it. I told you, I can't tell you! All right, all right. I will give you a hint about the title . . . fair enough? Okay, let's just say that after *Murder in the Study*, *Murder in the Lounge* and *Murder in the Dining Room*, I'm running out of rooms to kill people in . . . *inside* the house! Sorry, that's all I can say. But expect it in the post before the week is out. Love to Janice . . . goodbye, Marty! (*Hangs up the phone.*) Dear Marty. You worry so! (*Lifting HER wine glass.*) Here's to *Murder in the Garden*, the next bestseller by Miranda Belgraves! (*Sips the wine.*) Now, let me see. Where was I? (*MIRANDA sets down the wine and sits at the desk again.*) Oh, yes! (*Intoning emotionlessly, as SHE types.*) He's killing me . . . murder . . . murder . . . Someone, please -

BERTIE: (*Off.*) Hallo? Mrs. Belgraves?

MIRANDA: (*Annoyed.*) Oh, drat! (*Rising from the desk.*) Just what I need! Bloody awful Londoners invading Maidstone! I haven't had a moment of peace since she moved in next door! (*Laughs.*) Steady now. A girl from Liverpool can hardly throw stones at glass houses!

BERTIE TRASK enters from the doorway STAGE RIGHT. SHE is a friendly, jovial woman in HER 50's. BERTIE wears a house dress and an apron. SHE speaks with a cockney accent.

BERTIE: Ah, there you are, dear. Your door was unlocked, practically wide open! 'Ave a care, dear. Anybody could just walk right in.

MIRANDA: (*Moving to BERTIE.*) Yes . . . I see that now. Thank you, Mrs. Trask. (*Taking HER by the arm.*) Will that be all, then? (*Ushering BERTIE toward the door.*) Very good. I'm frightfully busy!

BERTIE: (*Breaking away and moving to the desk.*) Oh yes, I know. I could 'ear you clatterin' away at the typewriter clear over to my 'ouse. (*Eying the manuscript.*) New book?

MIRANDA: (*Moving to the desk protectively.*) Yes. I hope you will enjoy it, Mrs. Trask . . . once it's published and you can purchase a copy.

BERTIE: Lookin' forward to it! I rather liked *Murder in the Billiard Room*, you know. All of them, really. Genius, I say. Simply genius! And imagine 'aving the creator of such murder and mayhem livin' right next door! Thrilling, I say. Simply thrilling! And now, I 'ear they're going to make *Murder in the Kitchen* into a movie. 'Ow exciting! Who was it I 'eard was going to play Derek? Oh, you know . . . that actor . . . what's-'is-name . . . 'e was married to who's-it for a wee bit. You know, she 'ad that funny little show on the telly.

MIRANDA: (*Taking BERTIE by the arm again.*) So nice of you to stop by, Mrs. Trask. (*Ushering HER to the door.*) And now, if there's nothing else -

RORY: (*Off.*) Mrs. Belgraves . . . ?

RORY TRASK enters the room from the doorway STAGE LEFT. HE is a very handsome young man in his 20's, dressed in a tank top and pajama bottoms. HE speaks with a cockney accent as well. RORY appears startled by the presence of his mother, BERTIE.

Oh . . . mum!

BERTIE: Why, Rory. Wot brings you 'ere? Mrs. Belgraves is very busy with 'er new book, I 'ope you know! (*To MIRANDA.*) You know my son, Rory, of course. (*To RORY, sternly.*) Rory, say 'ello to Mrs. Belgraves.

RORY: (*Flustered.*) Evenin', Mrs. Belgraves. I was just . . . I mean . . . well, I . . . the door was wide open!

MIRANDA: Yes, I must see to that . . . *soon!*

RORY: Mum, I didn't know you was . . . I mean, I thought you was 'ome, bakin' them cookies.

BERTIE: (*Hitting HER forehead.*) Oh yes, of course! (*Turning to MIRANDA.*) Forgive me, dear. I completely forgot why I popped over to see you in the first place. I'm on my second batch of cookies . . .

RORY: (*Beaming.*) Oatmeal raisin!

BERTIE: Yes, that's right, dear. (*To MIRANDA.*) And I'm afraid I'm runnin' low on sugar. I don't suppose I could impose on you to - -

MIRANDA: (*Eagerly.*) Of course, Mrs. Trask. Anything to get you out of here . . . (*Catching HERSELF, sweetly.*) And back to those delicious cookies!

RORY: Oatmeal raisin!

MIRANDA: Yes . . . well, follow me to the pantry, please, Mrs. Trask. We'll fix you right up.

BERTIE: That's very kind of you.

MIRANDA leads BERTIE through the doorway STAGE RIGHT. RORY looks around cautiously and removes a well-folded sheet of paper from the pocket of HIS jeans. HE unfolds the sheet and reads it. MIRANDA's voice can be heard.

MIRANDA: (*VOICE.*) "Dear Cupcake . . ."

RORY holds the paper against HIS chest and sighs.

RORY: Cupcake . . . oh, Miranda! (*Reads.*)

MIRANDA: (*VOICE.*) "I know that I've told you in my letters not to speak with me, for fear that my husband might suspect something. But I feel the time is coming soon when this wall of silence will be torn down. I no longer care if Sam finds out how I feel about you. I've wanted you for so long now, Rory. Ever since that lovely autumn day when I watched you rake the leaves in those sexy jeans of yours. How many nights have I tossed and turned thinking about . . .?"

RORY stops reading abruptly, surveying HIS attire.

RORY: Wait a minute! Me sexy jeans! (*Hitting HIS forehead.*) Rory, you silly twit! If the time 'as come to tear down the . . . the . . .
(*RORY checks the paper, MIRANDA is heard.*)

MIRANDA: (*VOICE.*) "Wall of silence."

RORY: Right! If the time 'as come, I best do it up proper. If it's me sexy jeans she wants, it's me sexy jeans she'll get! I best change! *(RORY folds the paper and replaces it into HIS t-shirt pocket. HE takes a whiff of HIS underarm.)* Whew! Maybe I should 'ave a wash too!

RORY rushes off through the doorway STAGE LEFT. BERTIE re-enters from the doorway STAGE RIGHT, followed by MIRANDA. BERTIE carries a coffee mug.

BERTIE: . . . And I don't 'ave to tell you 'ow much that 'urts! But I does all right in the summer. It's only in the winter that it really flares up! And of course, on beastly rainy nights like tonight. Cor, I feel it straight down to me bones, I does! *(Looks around, moving to the loveseat.)* Rory? Must've 'eaded back 'ome - - straight back to the telly, I shouldn't wonder. *(Sits.)* Mind you, I've tried me best with Rory, I really 'ave. But . . . well, without a father figger

. . . I don't mind tellin' you, sometimes 'e frightens me. That's right, me own son. There I've said it. 'E's hit me on more than one occasion, you know!

MIRANDA: *(Sits beside BERTIE, concerned.)* No!

BERTIE: Disgraceful, I say. Simply disgraceful. Of course that's when 'e's been drinking. Rory can't 'old 'is drink, not like 'is father could. And then last week, 'e just up and steals me wedding band - - right off me bureau. And what do you suppose 'e does with it? Just guess!

MIRANDA: I really couldn't say, I'm sure.

BERTIE: Why, 'e pawns it, that's wot my boy Rory does! Criminal, I say. Simply criminal. Well, that was the last the straw, I tell you. I says to 'im, I says, that's the straw, Rory! And I meant it! That boy'll be my death, wait and see if 'e ain't! I'm so sorry to burden you will all me troubles, Mrs. Belgraves. But oh, it does feel good to 'ave a sit, doesn't it?

MIRANDA: Yes, well. I'm afraid that I really can't—

BERTIE: Oh, come now. It won't kill you to take a wee bit of a break. I've 'eard you clatterin' on that typewriter since teatime. You must be pretty near done by now.

MIRANDA: Just another page or 2.

BERTIE: My, isn't that nice? And 'ow will it end then?

MIRANDA: *(Rising.)* I'm sorry, I really can't tell you that. Mrs. Trask.

BERTIE: Of course, I understand. Foolish of me to ask. *(Getting to HER feet.)* Well, I shan't keep you any longer. Mrs. Belgraves. I do thank you for the cup of sugar. I will let you get back to your last few pages.

MIRANDA: Thank you, Mrs. Trask.

MIRANDA turns back to HER desk and takes up the glass of wine. BERTIE starts for the STAGE LEFT doorway and then turns back.

BERTIE: *(Hesitantly.)* Mrs. Belgraves . . .

MIRANDA: *(Setting the glass back down.)* Yes, Mrs. Trask?

BERTIE: *(Anxiously.)* Well . . . you know me, I 'ate to be a bother. And I certainly wouldn't want to sound too pushy. But I was wonderin' if perhaps you had a chance to read *my* story? I mean, I know 'ow terribly busy you are and all . . .

MIRANDA: Your story, of course. *(Moving to the bookcase.)* I read as much as I could stand . . . *(Catching HERSELF, sweetly.)* I mean, it certainly stands alone.

BERTIE: *(Ecstatic.)* Oh?!

MIRANDA: Oh, yes.

MIRANDA produces a homemade-looking manuscript from the bookcase. SHE holds it gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

BERTIE: So you liked it then?

MIRANDA: Well, let me just say that in the pantheon of mystery writers, there are the greats - Christie, Hammett, Ellery Queen . . . there's everyone else who's ever written a book . . . *(Hands the manuscript to BERTIE.)* And then there's you.

BERTIE: *(Flattered.)* Oh! *(Beat; crestfallen.)* Oh. Well, that doesn't sound like you fancied me story at all!

MIRANDA: Whenever you feel the desire to create, Mrs. Trask, I suggest you stick to the oatmeal raisins.

BERTIE: Well, this, of course, was just a first attempt. You may be pleased to know that I am now much more organized with me notes. I even know 'ow my *next* story is goin' to end!

MIRANDA: As a writer, Mrs. Trask, I have only one hard and fast rule - - never know how the story is going to end until you get there.

BERTIE: (*Excited.*) Oh, my! That is good advice, dear! (*BERTIE hands the mug to MIRANDA. SHE produces a pencil from HER apron and scribbles on HER manuscript, muttering to HERSELF.*) “Never know ‘ow the story is goin’ to end ‘til you get there.” Yes, that’s good, ain’t it? Brilliant, I say. Simply brilliant!

MIRANDA: (*Handing the mug back to BERTIE; curtly.*) Good evening, Mrs. Trask. Careful not to catch your death out in that rain . . . (*Pointedly.*) On your way home!

BERTIE: (*Pocketing the pencil.*) Oh, yes. Yes, of course. (*Starts for the doorway STAGE RIGHT.*) Well, thank you for the sugar . . . and the advice! (*Turns back.*) Oh, Mrs. Belgraves . . .

MIRANDA: (*Exasperated.*) What is it?

BERTIE: Oh . . . well, I . . . I was just wonderin’ about that ‘usband of yours. ‘Aven’t seen ‘im in a fortnight or so. Everything all right, then?

MIRANDA: Everything’s just fine. Good night, Mrs. Trask.

BERTIE: Good night, then.

BERTIE exits through the doorway STAGE LEFT. MIRANDA moves to the bookcase.

MIRANDA: (*Laughs to HERSELF.*) Oh, that dreadful woman with her dreadful son and that dreadful manuscript! They should all go back to Whitechapel, the whole bloody lot of them! (*Laughs to HERSELF.*) Well, I won’t let her little invasion ruin this evening for me. (*Arranging some books.*) Better make room for *Murder in the Garden*. (*Takes up a book and reads the back flap.*) “Belgraves’ prose breathes new life into the genre of murder and death”. (*From the back cover.*) “Miranda Belgraves resides in Maidstone, with her devoted husband, Sam” (*Scoffs.*) Devoted? (*MIRANDA replaces the book on the shelf.*) Apparently, sometimes fiction spills out onto the book jacket. (*MIRANDA moves to the desk, sips HER wine.*) Just another page or two . . . (*Reading from the paper in the typewriter, intoning emotionlessly.*) He’s killing me . . . murder . . . murder . . . Someone, please - (*A loud “thud” is heard, startling MIRANDA.*) Hello? (*Angrily.*) What is it now, Mrs. Trask?! (*Silence. MIRANDA rises to HER feet fearfully.*) Mrs. Trask . . .? (*Annoyed.*) Very well, this will put an end to your foolishness once and for all, you nosy old busybody! (*MIRANDA picks up the phone receiver and dials. Into the phone.*)

Hello, Sgt. Mumphrey. This is Miranda Belgraves . . . oh, did you? Well, thank you, Sergeant. Yes, it is going to be a movie. Yes, I'm very excited that he's going to play Derek. Well, I don't know . . . Please, Sergeant . . .

I called because I heard a prowler. Could you send someone? Thirty minutes? By then, I could be . . . very well. Thank you, Sergeant. No, never mind.

MIRANDA hangs up the phone. Another loud "thud" is heard. MIRANDA grows frantic.

Hello?!

MIRANDA moves to the closet, SHE emerges hefting a heavy crowbar.

A crowbar served Francesca well enough in *Murder in the Ballroom*. (*Pondering.*) How on earth did I manage to place a crowbar in the ballroom? (*The phone rings, MIRANDA screams. SHE brandishes the crowbar and slowly moves to the phone. It rings again, MIRANDA drops the crowbar on the desk.*) What am I doing? Sneaking up on the phone?! (*MIRANDA picks up the receiver and talks into the phone.*) Sgt. Mumphrey, thank goodness. I really think you should send -

SAM: (*VOICE.*) Miranda, what's wrong?

MIRANDA: (*Frantic.*) Oh, Sam! Sam, I think someone's in the house!

SAM: (*VOICE.*) In the house? Where?

MIRANDA: I don't know *where*. He could be anywhere. He could be - -

BY WHITNEY RYAN GARRITY

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