

DARLING, YOU SLAY ME!

A MURDER IN THREE ACTS

By Tom Shelton and Alyssa Canann

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SYNOPSIS: The time is 1929, the place is New York City. It is the opening night party at a swank Times Square restaurant for a particularly dreadful new Broadway musical. With each new review comes a mysterious death, and so it falls to Anthony Badger, food critic and amateur sleuth, along with the audience, to sort out the patterns and find the killer.

A smart, affectionate parody of theatrical characters in the best glimpse-backstage tradition. This comic murder mystery is perfect for small theatre companies who need small-cast plays. Commissioned by The Gourmet Detective (Orange County, CA), it has proved to be an audience favorite.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4-6 MEN, 3-5 WOMEN, 1 PIANIST)

APRIL JUNE (f) Young, attractive, wide-eyed and “shiny.” A girl of genuine talent, she is making her Broadway debut in a tiny role, as well as understudying the star. Offstage, she is soft-spoken, shy, and full of gratitude for this wonderful opportunity. We learn soon enough that just underneath this facade is a ruthless and heartless young woman willing to do anything to get ahead. She might be blonde. *(16 lines)*

THELMA VELDHUISEN (f).....Shares many of April's attributes, including talent, beauty and an ambition to act. But unlike April, she is fair-minded, thoughtful and compassionate. For many years, she's been a true-blue girlfriend to Ira, though her patience grows thin with his reluctance to grow up. She might be dark-haired and wear glasses. *(50 lines)*

DESIREE AUGRATIN (f)A Broadway leading lady in the grand tradition. Of indeterminate, yet decidedly middle, age, she is egotistical and over the top, with a tendency to project to the rear balcony even when she's nowhere near a theater. Despite her gushing manner, she is enormously insecure. She's also a bit of a fake: there's a self-made, street-smart New Jersey girl lurking underneath it all. *(34 lines)*

LORETTA LUKOWSKY (f).....An NYPD vice cop. Tough, fearless, outspoken. But also capable of the occasional girlish infatuation. A proud, lifelong New Yorker. *(28 lines)*

MARJORIE WORTHINGTON (f). The gracious, patrician wife of Ken. A woman of exquisite taste and a genuine lover of the arts, she would likely prefer hosting elegant dinner parties for up and coming novelists at her Park Avenue apartment to working in the hurly-burly world of Broadway. With her husband, she is co-producer of *He Rang the Bell!* She probably considered it a mistake from the beginning, but was too well-bred to say so, for fear of hurting anyone's feelings. (68 lines)

FRITZ LARDI (m)..... The Hungarian founder, owner, and maître d' of Lardi's Restaurant – the New York theater crowd's favorite watering hole. He is warm, ebullient and deeply in love with the theater. He adores his job. (5 lines)

KEN WORTHINGTON (m)..... Husband to Marjorie and co-producer of *He Rang the Bell!* A high-strung, perpetually agitated man who fancies himself as much smoother and more powerful than he actually is. Having grown up on the wrong side of the tracks, he is always on the prowl for the Big Score, the Next Big Thing, whatever it takes to be a Player. (29 lines)

RAFE JESTER (m).....A Broadway matinee idol in the grand tradition. His popularity can only be explained by his manly good looks and studied charm, since he possesses not even a trace of talent. Unfortunately, his gigantic ego would have it he is God's gift to the Art of Acting. In addition to being profoundly stupid, he is a liar, coward, and heartless womanizer. He has a small scar on his cheek. (51 lines)

IRA "SKIPPY" CRUMBEIN (m)... Big Man on Campus at Indiana University, he is making his Broadway debut as author of the book, music and lyrics of *He Rang the Bell!* He suffers from the vast egocentricity and stunning immodesty of youth. Which is not to say he doesn't also have a lot of talent, heart, brains and charm. (63 lines)

ANTHONY BADGER (m).....A critic-at-large for the *New York Morning Spectator*, he writes about food, the theater, and other cultural topics as the spirit moves him. Erudite, witty, and exquisitely well-mannered, he is also an amateur sleuth of some standing, earning himself the title The Gourmet Detective. He has carried a torch for Marjorie since the two of them were undergraduates together at Cornell. (57 lines)

DICK MARCH (m)A Romanian stage director (real name: Dischka Markovsky), making his American commercial theater debut. He is imperious, dour, and prone to tirades. But his intense passion for the theater gives him a charismatic allure to both men and women. (57 lines)

TWEED (m).....The musical director of *He Rang the Bell!* who has taken his usual position at the piano bench for the opening night party at Lardi's. He's a Runyonesque, seen-it-all, seasoned and sardonic veteran of innumerable orchestra pits.

NOTE ON CASTING

If a smaller cast is wanted, Actress 1 doubles April/Thelma, Actress 2 doubles Desiree/Loretta and Actor 1 triples Fritz/Ken/Rafe. The play was originally written for a cast of seven, and the doubling (and in one case tripling) was born of that restriction, which turned out to be an asset: audiences enjoy seeing an actor return as a different character. But if a larger cast is wanted, the play can easily be performed without the doubling/tripling for a total of eleven actors (and one piano player.)

PROPERTIES

PERSONAL

BADGER:

- Reporter's notebook and fountain pen
- Large stalk of celery (for breast pocket of tuxedo jacket)
- Glass of celery juice
- Dagwood sandwich
- A copy of *Variety* with the famous headline from October 1929, "Wall Street Lays An Egg."

MARJORIE:

- Large bowl of fruit
- Small gun (practical starter pistol)
- Prescription bottle of "nerve tablets"

DICK:

- Tin of breath mints
- Flask
- 3 personal checks (each different)
- 3 hotel room keys (from 3 different New York hotels)
- Blue lipstick for use at curtain call (optional)

IRA:

- Very long prepared speech
- Gift box of fudge
- Small glass bottle marked "Arsenic" or "Poison"
- Prescription bottle of "nerve tablets"

THELMA:

- Prescription bottle of "nerve tablets"

DESIREE:

- Prescription bottle of "nerve tablets"
- Martini glass

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KEN/RAFE:

- Checkbook and fountain pen (Ken)
- Prescription bottle containing “nerve tablets”(Rafe)
- Small bottle of makeup remover (Rafe)
- Handkerchief (Ken and Rafe)
- Bottle of Martini olives (Rafe)
- Trick knife with retractable blade (a prop from “He Rang The Bell”; should resemble a Gypsy skairf or dagger.)

LORETTA:

- Fountain pen
- Thick tablet resembling a policeman’s citation book
- Handcuffs (3 minimum)

GENERAL SET

- Champagne glasses (8)
- Champagne bottles
- Water glass (1)
- Martini glasses (2)
- Apple (edible)
- The New York Evening Telegram* (5 copies minimum)
- The New York Graphic* (4 copies minimum)
- The New York Morning Gazette* (1 copy minimum)
- The New York Morning Spectator* (2 copies minimum)

A note on the newspapers:

All the names of the papers in the play are fictional (except for *The Graphic*) which means four different era-appropriate fonts need to be found and an era-appropriate newspaper (reproduction) doctored accordingly on its masthead. It’s very important that the papers look both a) “real” in terms of size and paper quality; and b) of the era. A modern newspaper with only a faked masthead is very distracting. As an aid to the actors, the texts to the reviews can be printed inside, although there is always the danger of an actor grabbing the wrong newspaper...!

SCENE

Lardi's, a restaurant.

TIME: 1929, New York, Theatre District

SETTING

Darling, You Slay Me! is written to be performed as either a dinner show or conventionally. If done as a dinner show in a real restaurant, the play has the distinct advantage of being set in a restaurant. A few well-chosen set dressings can serve to evoke the era (the late 1920s) and the location (New York's Theatre District). The action takes place in the main dining room of Lardi's.

Lardi's is an obvious spin on Sardi's, the famous New York restaurant where opening night parties are to this day most commonly held. Sardi's is likewise famous for not changing its décor in decades: red leather booths, table lamps, thick, white, heavily-starched tablecloths, etc. Most striking of all, of course, are the famous caricatures of Broadway personalities past and present that literally cover the walls. Using a few caricatures of 1920s theatrical luminaries in Lardi's – perhaps oversized or impressionistic – can nicely evoke and pay homage to Sardi's.

An appropriately placed banner that reads “Welcome to *He Rang the Bell!* Opening Night Party!” as well as some balloons, flower bouquets and other party paraphernalia are helpful to establish the occasion and setting. (Particularly useful if audiences are arriving at an actual restaurant.) Perhaps the opening night party-planners, in honor of the show being celebrated this night (*He Rang the Bell!*), have added “Gypsy-themed” elements to the restaurant's usual décor.

A small platform for use as a kind of stage (for Ira and April's song) and to give some variety to the levels of playing space, is useful but not crucial. It can also be used to give focus to the pianist (if used).

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Three entrances/exits are needed and can be chosen at the director's discretion: 1) An entrance into the dining room directly from "the street," most likely passing through a bar area (unseen). 2) A door leading to the kitchen. 3) A door/passageway leading to the powder room (Ladies) and washroom (Mens).

All in all, the setting should evoke as much period elegance as possible, matching the characters themselves – the men all in tuxedos and the women in their finest eveningwear.

MUSICAL NUMBERS

- SONG 1** THE TIPSY GYPSY Ira and April
SONG 2 UNIVERSITY OF LOVE..... Marjorie and Badger
SONG 3 MY SOUL, IT SINGS!.....Rafe

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Darling, You Slay Me! was originally produced by
The Gourmet Detective in Orange County, CA.

PRESHOW

If done as a dinner show:

*At approximately 30 minutes before show time, guests arriving at the restaurant (Or whatever performance venue is used) are each handed a faux-playbill from the Belasco Theater with the logo of **He Rang the Bell!** on its cover (inside might be the actual performance program. Our audience is asked to imagine they have just attended the opening night performance of **He Rang the Bell!** a block and a half away, and have been invited to join in the post-show festivities at Lardi's. All the actors are present and in character for this improvised pre-show. TWEED, the in-house pianist, is already present at his keyboard, providing a festive musical background. FRITZ, the owner and proprietor of Lardi's, is enthusiastically playing the perfect host, greeting everyone as a treasured and welcome friend. He occasionally dubs someone a recognizable celebrity of the era, such as Clara Bow, Greta Garbo, Ethel Barrymore, Rudolf Valentino, etc., and introduces them as such to the room at large. MARJORIE, the producer of **He Rang the Bell!** is likewise greeting friends and colleagues from her high-powered Park Avenue circle. IRA, the first-time-out author of the show, is beside himself with excitement, and perhaps greets some of the guests as family and friends who've come all the way from his hometown in Indiana to be there for his opening. APRIL, the pretty young ingénue making her New York acting debut, is appropriately grateful, demure, and awestruck. DICK, the dour director of **He Rang the Bell!** eagerly seeks the opinions and reactions of audience members who have just come from the Belasco. Tensions, rivalries, flirtations, etc. between the characters themselves are also established and riffed upon. The actress who will eventually appear as DESIREE is present in full tuxedo as Fritz's maitre d'. In short, the actors actively engage the audience whenever possible and make it their task to establish the Who, What, Where and When (1929) of the evening ahead. If the actors are also performing in the capacity of servers, they will show the guests to their tables and perhaps serve them salads or appetizers. If liquor is served, cocktail waitresses in period attire will make the rounds.*

ACT ONE

The lights dim; a special hits FRITZ LARDI, who has made his way to the center of the room; and TWEED helps him to gain focus with a fanfare.

FRITZ: Ladies und gentlemen! Welcome to my restaurant! I am Fritz Lardi. I name it for myself, yes, but tonight it is also your restaurant because you are my children, children of the Theater, Babies of Broadway!

HE FREEZES. A sudden pinspot on BADGER. Musical cue.

BADGER: Opening night! Was it really only four weeks ago that this magnificently absurd process began? Were they four weeks well-spent? I shall leave that verdict to my colleagues, the drama critics. Meanwhile, we wait in agony till the papers hit the streets: it's the show after the show. It's called...the Opening Night Party!

FRITZ: *(End FREEZE.)* But who is this? Anthony Badger, the Gourmet Detective himself? Are you here with your hat on as restaurant critic? Certainly not as Master Sleuth? Herr Badger, tonight there is nothing but love in my restaurant.

BADGER: Fear not, Fritz. Your Piquant Pigeon a la Lardi is safe for now. I am in the midst of a tragic experiment: I am, if you'll excuse the expression, dieting.

He removes a stalk of celery from his tuxedo pocket and displays it forlornly.

FRITZ: Ach du lieber! Surely not you, Herr Badger! The most brilliant olfactician in New York? But why?

BADGER: *(Patting his stomach.)* Sheer vanity, Fritz...a lady.

FRITZ: Badger, you're an animal. Who is she?

BADGER: That, my friend, I cannot reveal.

MARJORIE enters.

FRITZ: Ladies und gentlemen, is this not the most beautiful producer on Broadway? (*Kiss-kiss.*) And what a beautiful play she gave us tonight. Mrs. Marjorie Worthington! (*Leads applause.*)

MARJORIE: Thank you, darling Fritz. Ladies and gentlemen, Europe's most visionary director, and how fortunate we are to have snared him for *He Rang the Bell!*, Dischka Markovsky, or as he is now known on Broadway, Dick March! (*Leads applause.*)

DICK: (*Sotto voce.*) Mrs. Marjorie. We must speak. This show - it should not have opened tonight. I need three, no, six, no, ten more weeks of rehearsal. Only then can I hope to realize my vision.

MARJORIE: Dick! Darling Dick, it's just not done that way on Broadway, dear. And even if it were...we're out of money!

DICK: But -

MARJORIE: (*Cutting him off.*) Tony, you darling old thing! (*Kiss-kiss.*)

DICK, exasperated, moves away.

BADGER: You seemed upset just now. Do I smell trouble?

MARJORIE: (*Defensively.*) Trouble? With the show? Whatever do you mean?

BADGER: Margie. You can't fool me. It's Tony. Remember?

An argument is heard offstage. IRA and THELMA enter, in the midst of a lovers' quarrel.

IRA: Thelma! This is hardly the time or the place. Do you want someone to hear you? (*HE backs into BADGER, causing him to spit-take his celery juice.*) Sorry, Tony.

BADGER: (*Annoyed.*) Quite all right. I think I've reached my limit with this stuff anyway.

MARJORIE: Ladies and gentlemen! Allow me to introduce the fabulously talented composer, lyricist and author of *He Rang the Bell!* - Mr. Ira "Skippy" Crumbein! (*Leads applause.*)

IRA: Thank you. Thanks, Mrs. Worthington. Marjorie. Thanks, Dick. Thank you, _____. (*Insert audience member names.*) Thank you each and every one of you. I can't tell you how much it means to have all of you here. Your love and support from the very beginning has made possible the beautiful piece of theatre you saw tonight, that I wrote, *He Rang the Bell!* You know, I'm a professional writer. It's my job to be eloquent. So let me just say - (*Reaches into pocket; removes and unfolds a prepared speech - it's about 20 pages long.*)

BADGER: (*Eager to cut him off, indicates THELMA.*)

And who is this?

IRA: Oh, er, this is Thelma. Thelma Veldhuisen.

MARJORIE: Of course. I've seen you two together.

IRA: She's Desiree's dresser. I helped get her the job.

THELMA: Skippy! May I see you...please. (*BADGER and MARJORIE turn away discreetly.*) Do you have to humiliate me in front of the producer??

IRA: What are you talking about? Being a dresser is a perfectly respectable job for someone trying to break into the theater.

THELMA: (*Furious.*) Break in?

IRA: You should be glad for the work, considering you didn't get the understudy.

THELMA: How dare you treat me like some kind of...acquaintance, Ira. Are you still in love with me?

IRA: What kind of question is that? You're - we - we went to college together!

THELMA: Skippy, what were you doing in April June's dressing room till two a.m. last night and don't lie to me!

IRA: Thelma, I'm worried about you. This preoccupation with April June is a little bit frightening.

THELMA: I hate her. She's a vamp, Ira, and she's after you! And I think you like it. That's why you wanted her for the understudy instead of me

IRA: Thel. Honey. I had to do it. (*As if this were reassuring.*) Because she was better. (*THELMA starts to storm out.*) What!? Where are you going?

THELMA: I think I'll look for Rafe.

IRA: Rafe Jester?!

THELMA: He offered to buy me a cocktail after the show.

IRA: Rafe Jester?! He's a wolf! A lady's man! Lower than low! An actor!!

THELMA: Guess it takes one to know one, Skippy. (*SHE exits.*)

IRA, furious and confused, crosses to the bar. DICK is already there, nursing a glass of Romanian wine.

DICK: That Thelma, she is a good woman. You should marry her, settle down, go back to Indeeidahoo.

IRA: In-di-an-a. Marry Thelma? She's a sweet kid and all, but I think I've fallen in love with April June. And she with me. I think it's the real thing, Dick.

DICK: (*Darkly.*) Oh yes?

IRA: And frankly, Thelma has changed. I think she's threatened by my success.

DICK: Your "success"? There is an old Gypsy saying, translated roughly: "Don't crack your hazelnuts till the chipmunks have left the woods and the bears have all taken desk jobs."

IRA: (*Thinks hard for a moment. Finally.*) What?!

DICK: (*Slowly and loudly.*) Don't - crack - your - hazel -

IRA: Oh! "Don't count my chickens until they hatch." You mean the reviews. They're gonna be raves, Dick. *He Rang the Bell!* is romantic, it's ingenious, it's -

DICK: Dreck!

IRA: What??

MARJORIE enters.

DICK: It could be my greatest work to date! But I have been thwarted by piglets. The play must be completely rewritten. Now, it is like your American cheese: processed, bland and gummy. And the songs! As authentically Gypsy as you are.

IRA: (*Hurt.*) Now he tells me!

MARJORIE: Oh now, Ira...

DICK: You are all such babies!

MARJORIE: Now, Dick...

IRA: I'm a baby?! You're a baby!

DICK: Baby, baby, baby, baby -

APRIL enters. She may be the same actress who plays THELMA.

IRA: Big mean bully baby! (Sees APRIL.) April! Sing Marina's Act Two duet with me!

APRIL: But that would be sacrilege, Miss AuGratin will arrive any minute.

IRA: It's okay, honey. Let's let these people decide if I capture the Gypsy soul or not. Hit it, Tweed!

**SONG 1: THE TIPSY GYPSY
(IRA AND APRIL)**

IRA sings a verse of "The Topsy Gypsy."

IRA:

MY WILD GYPSY HEART,
SO YOUNG AND UNENCUMBERED
KNEW RIGHT FROM THE START
ITS WAND'RING DAYS WERE NUMBERED.
THE MOMENT WE KISSED,
THAT EV'NING IN THE GROTTTO.
MY WILD GYPSY HEART,
SO THRILLED WITH YOU,
SO FILLED WITH YOU, WAS ABSOLUTELY BLOTTO!

KEN enters, kisses MARJORIE. IRA and APRIL go into lip sync and a slow motion version of their choreography. KEN and MARJORIE speak in stage whispers, as if the singing is still going on.

MARJORIE: Where've you been all this time?

KEN: (Sweating; takes out a handkerchief.) Investor stuff.

MARJORIE: Good God!

KEN: Will you please relax!!! (Sweating even more.) Our little plan is pure as the driven snow; tight as a drum.

MARJORIE: Tight as a hangman's noose, more likely. Do you suppose they make them "His" and "Hers" or will we have to share?

KEN: Schnookums - what the hell are you so nervous about? We've taken risks before.

MARJORIE: I'm just so tired of feeling - Listen: I'm worried about Dick. He's got some crazy European idea about closing the show and reopening in six months or something. You know how he can be - like a mongoose.

KEN: That's no good. I better take care of him.

MARJORIE: (*Alarmed.*) You mean...!?

KEN: (*Sweating profusely now.*) Will you relax!!!!

Chorus of song continues;

IRA:

AND NOW I'M A TIPSY GYPSY
THO' I'VE NOT TOUCHED A DROP.

APRIL:

YOUR LIPS ON MINE,

IRA:

SWEETER THAN WINE,

BOTH:

ARE WHAT MADE MY HEART GO FLIPPITY-FLOP
FROM MINSK TO OLD POUGHKEEPSIE,
MY WAND'RING DAYS ARE THROUGH

IRA:

'CAUSE NOW I'M A TIPSY GYPSY
WHO'S INEBRIATED WITH YOU!

They lip sync again; DICK and KEN have drifted together.

DICK: (*Stage whisper.*) Mr. Ken! We must speak. Give me ten thousand of those Yankee dollars. I know you have it.

KEN: (*Splutters.*) What?!

DICK: The show - it is not good. In fact, a travesty! I need at least fourteen more weeks of rehearsal!

KEN: Sorry, buddy boy. No can do. We're outta money.

DICK: That's what your wife, Mrs. Marjorie, said as well...and still I don't believe it.

KEN: Since when are you my accountant, Dickie-boy?

DICK: Since I received these! *(Holds up three checks.)* Three checks totaling fifty thousand dollars! One from Mrs. Vanderbeek, *(Indicates a woman in the audience.)* one from Mrs. Rosenthal, *(Indicates another woman.)* and one from Mrs. Thorndike! *(Indicates yet another.)* They said they were for you. To help with your wonderful show. This puzzles me.

KEN: *(Beginning to sweat again.)* It's complicated, Dick.

DICK: But this puzzles me even more: *(Holding up three keys.)* How is it you are expected in one night at three different hotel rooms?

KEN: *(Sweating profusely.)* Listen, Dick, I -

DICK: Perhaps I should ask Mrs. Marjorie to explain *that* puzzlement.

Song continues:

APRIL: *(Song continues.)*
YOUR WILD GYPSY EYES
WERE CLEARLY MEANT TO TAUNT ME.
YOUR RICH GYPSY VOICE
WAS CLEARLY MEANT TO HAUNT ME.
OUR MAD GYPSY SOULS
WERE CLEARLY MADE TO SWOON
AND CROON LIKE TWO JUNE BUGS
SPOONING TO A LOVERS TUNE
BENEATH A GYPSY MOON.

Slow motion lip sync, as before.

KEN: *(Sweating even more; whispering.)* Whoa - whoa - whoa! Little secret, buddy boy: there's this sweet little accounting device called over-capitalization. Put up a show, close in one night, "lose everything," and still come out way ahead. Why? No investors to pay back. Very elegant.

DICK: (*Shocked.*) That sounds...illegal.

KEN: (*Offended.*) It's perfectly legal - you just don't want to get caught, that's all. I've wanted this show to flop from the start. Why do you think I commissioned this lousy piece of Gypsy garbage? But I gotta close quick or run the risk of some very Nosy Parkers. Once the newspapers annihilate us, I'm justified in shuttering.

DICK: Your greed disgusts me. But perhaps I can use it to my advantage. What price my silence, Ken Worthington?

KEN: Listen, here's a little something to say thanks. And for keeping our little secret, huh? (*Writes him a check.*) Ten thousand dollars...?

KEN exits. A final chorus of the song.

APRIL:

AND NOW I'M A TIPSYPY GYPSY,
THO' I'VE NOT HAD A NIP.

IRA:

YOUR WARM EMBRACE,

APRIL:

YOUR SWARTHY FACE,

BOTH:

ARE WHAT MADE MY HEART GO FLOPPITY-FLIP!
FROM MINSK TO OLD POUGHKEEPSIE,
BENEATH THE MOON AND SUN.

IRA:

THIS TIPSYPY GYPSY,

APRIL:

AND THIS TIPSYPY GYPSY,

BOTH:

SHALL WANDER THE WORLD AS ONE!

APPLAUSE, led by IRA for APRIL.

IRA: *(Over applause.)* Hear that Dick? They like it! They really like it!

Unfortunately, DESIREE has chosen this very moment to make her calculatedly late entrance. She naturally assumes the ovation is for herself. SHE waves, bows, blows kisses as if this is the LAST thing she expected from all these lovely people.

IRA: *(Continuing, hasn't yet noticed DESIREE's arrival.)* Listen to that, April! You're dynamite! This song never had a chance with Desiree. Desiree AuGratin is simply - far - too - old! *(HE sees DESIREE just at this moment. ALL are frozen in embarrassed horror. MARJORIE slips away.)* Desiree! You've...arrived!

DESIREE: Yes, Skippy Darling, je suis arrivé! I hobbled all the way here on these ancient old legs without any help from my private nurse. *(Pats IRA on the cheek. Spying someone she knows in the audience:)* Oh my God is this who I think it is? It is! Johnny Barrymore! You darling man, let me look at that profile. Oh! I could eat you right up. Listen, you were fabulous in whatchamacallit... *Hamlet?* Who wrote that piece? Well, he'll never amount to anything, absolutely no flair for comedy. Well, who heard a word, anyway, with you in those tights! Kiss-kiss, darling. *(Spying someone else, a woman.)* Good God...Kate? Katie Hepburn? Forgive me, darling, but where have you been hiding? Working at all? Listen, I for one admire that special look of yours, so...so...boy-next-door, isn't it? I'd love to try it myself - but I'm just too much woman I guess. *(Another man.)* Larry? Larry Olivier? All the way from England to see little me? You precious boy. We must do...lunch. You still have my number, no? *(Covers his ears; aside to the woman he's with.)* Talented, yes, but not on the stage, if you know what I mean. *(Has worked her way to APRIL.)* And who is this sweet YOUNG thing? Isn't it past your bedtime, honey?

DICK: Come now, Desiree. You know April June. She's your understudy.

DESIREE: Is she?? Well, I hate to disappoint you, sweetheart, but you won't be going on anytime soon. Or later. Or ever.

A loud THUD just offstage.

MARJORIE: *(Entering.)* The *Evening Telegram!* It's here, everyone!

IRA: Where are they?

MARJORIE: In the bar -

DESIREE: *(Clutching her heart.)* Dear God! A little kindness, that's all I ask!

ALL except DICK race towards bar, led by IRA. APRIL starts to go but is stopped by DICK.

DICK: April, wait! *(But he is interrupted by IRA, who enters shouting.)*

IRA: I got it! *(Tears open paper with trembling fingers.)* It's by Franklin Dubois!

APRIL: *(A crack in the mask.)* Just read it, Skippy!

IRA: I think it's a rave! "...all of a sudden *He Rang the Bell!* becomes thrilling theater. Miss April June is incandescent in the infinitesimal role of Ivanya the Beggar Girl. This reviewer found himself "begging" for more, more, more of Ivanya! The sensual charisma of this young, fresh, certain-to-be Star-of-Tomorrow electrifies the entire production." Congratulations, April!

APRIL: Go on.

IRA: "Her performance is even more remarkable given the incoherent ramblings of Ira Crumbein's book, music and lyrics..."
I - I think I want to be alone.

IRA staggers off. APRIL grabs the newspaper from him and continues to read the notice greedily.

DICK: April! I have real news! The Worthingtons refuse to re-do the show. To hell with them, they are criminals! Enemies to art! But look what he gave me: ten thousand dollars! We shall mount our own production of *He Rang the Bell!* with you as the star, Marina Piroshki!

APRIL: Oh, Dick!

THEY rush into each other's arms. Big kiss.

DICK: (*Passionately.*) My goddess! My muse! I knew it from the instant you walked into auditions!

HE goes for another kiss. SHE stops him.

APRIL: (*Carefully.*) Dick. I think I need to change my plans. Didn't you hear? I got a rave on Broadway! That's good as gold. I don't need to play Marina Piroshki anymore. (*Becoming more and more excited.*) I'm going straight to Hollywood. Tonight!

DICK: (*Shocked and utterly disgusted.*) Hollywood?! I would sooner work for tips in a dinner theatre! April, you are a WHORE!

APRIL: (*SHE slaps him, enraged.*) How dare you call me that! (*With a sudden, hollow laugh.*) You really believed I meant to tag along with your wild-eyed schemes, didn't you?

DICK: (*Shaken.*) We shared so much. Passions. Ideals. I actually believed you loved me. It seems you were an even better actress than I thought.

APRIL: Goodbye, Dick. I've just got time to book a midnight berth on the 20th Century Limited. (*SHE starts to leave, then stops and holds out her hand to him.*) And thanks...for everything.

DICK: (*Taking a quick drink.*) April. There is an old Gypsy saying: "What good's a sack of cashews on the rocky road to Budapest?"

APRIL: (*Thinks.*) What?

DICK: "Always leave a lover with a kiss."

SHE hesitates but goes to him. THEY kiss.

IRA, MARJORIE, KEN, BADGER and DESIREE enter; all but DESIREE hold copies of The Evening Telegram. DICK and APRIL are still locked in a clinch for all to see.

IRA: April! You and Dick?! You didn't tell me. I think I need to lie down.

DICK and APRIL break the clinch. DICK pops a licorice.

APRIL: If you'll all excuse me - I'm going to wire my mother with the news about my review! (*Exits.*)

MARJORIE: (*Scans the paper.*) Peculiar that he doesn't seem to mention you, Desiree.

DESIREE: (*Stricken, she tries to be nonchalant.*) Odd. Frankie Dubois has always been crazy about me, the sweet old thing.

MARJORIE: No, wait, I'm wrong: "...a word about the injudicious casting of Desiree AuGratin in the role of Marina. Thankfully, the skillful direction of Dick March tends to obscure the fact that Miss AuGratin is neither an ingénue nor a singer."

DESIREE: That bastard!

MARJORIE: (*Continues reading.*) "Nonetheless, it is my duty to report the one thought in everyone's mind: Miss AuGratin should step aside as soon as possible, allowing the radiant Miss June, who is also her understudy, to bring the role of Marina truly and youthfully to life."

DESIREE: (*Muttering ferociously.*) Over my dead body...

MARJORIE: (*Takes off her reading glasses.*) Oh my. I am sorry, Desiree.

DESIREE: Where the hell are my nerve tablets...?

MARJORIE/KEN/IRA: (*Ad lib; together.*) Have one of mine...?

DESIREE: I prefer my own, thanks.

SHE finds them. SHE, KEN, MARJORIE, IRA each pop their own tablets. DESIREE refills her glass.

DESIREE: Well, everyone. A toast to our first review?

ALL cross to bar where eight glasses of champagne await. BADGER holds back. DICK has his flask.

APRIL: (*Enters.*) I'm afraid I'm going to have to say goodnight.

DESIREE: You're not leaving till you have a glass of champagne. Even if you are only six years old.

KEN, MARJORIE, IRA and DESIREE all extend their glasses to APRIL, but APRIL doesn't know which one to take. DESIREE is the most insistent.

KEN/MARJORIE/IRA/DESIREE: *(Ad lib.)* Here you are - Take mine - No, take mine - Have this one, etc.

DESIREE: No, take mine. *(APRIL accepts it.)* To “the young,” “the radiant,” “Star-of-Tomorrow,” Miss April June!

ALL: *(Encouraging audience to raise glasses.)* To April!

THEY drink.

APRIL: This has been the best night of my life and I'll never - *(SHE begins to feel woozy; coughs and chokes.)* - I'll never...

SHE collapses into DESIREE's arms.

MARJORIE: Oh dear. Desiree? Let's help her to the powder room.

MARJORIE and DESIREE escort the drooping APRIL out of the room.

BADGER: Oh, dear. Excitement just too much for her, do you suppose?

DICK: Such a shame - she seemed so pleased with herself.

IRA: *(Bitterly.)* Can you blame her? She got the best notice of anybody.

KEN: Jeez, I hope she gets better. I mean - if she, if she - uh - think of the scandal. We might have to close the show.

A scream offstage.

DESIREE: *(Rushing on.)* Oh my God! She's dead. *(Goes to fix herself a drink.)*

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