

MURDER AT THE ASYLUM

a whodunnit in four acts

by

Peter De Geesewell



first night: 23rd September 1993
revised and enlarged in 2009

The persons of the play (in order of appearance)

- Jane Nurse Jane is the head nurse at Dr McLeod's mental hospital in Killin, Scotland. Dr McLeod has given her the job to direct his play "The Shooting of President Lincoln" which he sees as part of the patients' therapy. She is not really happy about his unconventional methods.
- Marilyn She is the first of the patients. She thinks she is Marilyn Monroe. She is blonde, wears sexy clothes from the Fifties, uses a vulgar red lipstick and flirts with any male person available.
- La Diva She is the second patient. She thinks she is the great opera singer Cecilia Bartoli. Unfortunately her voice does not quite live up to the high standards of operatic singing. All the same the nursing team do their best to live with her awful singing. Some of the patients however can become very irritated by her terrible voice. Normally La Diva is very much in control of herself and of every situation. She always carries her handbag with her and she usually wears gloves.
- Hitler He is the third patient. He thinks he is Adolf Hitler and is very proud of himself. He wears his hair short, with a parting on the right and of course a small moustache. He is dressed in a sort of uniform and walks around ramrod stiffly. He does not speak – he shouts like a sergeant major on the drill ground.
- Caesar He is the fourth patient. He thinks he is the famous Roman Julius Caesar. He is dressed in a Roman toga and wears a laurel-wreath on his head. There is a certain rivalry between Caesar and Hitler as each is convinced that he is the best general and strategist in world history.
- Director Dr James McLeod is the director of the mental asylum. He used to teach history at a very expensive, very white, public school. He left the school after about twenty years of teaching, frustrated and disgusted because his students simply were not interested in history and because the school was opened to girls and coloured students.
- Black Nurse Rose Black is a coloured woman. She was one of the director's students in his time as a teacher and works for him now. She is very proud of her African heritage and does not like Dr McLeod's nickname "Blackie" for her which goes back to her school days.
- Queen She is the fifth patient. She imagines herself to be Mary Queen of Scots. (1542 -1587). She wears royal clothes and bears herself regally – except when she has drunk a little too much – which happens whenever she can find a drink. Her nickname is "Bloody Mary" because of historical reasons and because of her favourite drink.
- Happy He is the sixth patient. He is a small, affectionate person and thinks he is one of the Seven Dwarfs. He always wears coloured rubber boots, an obviously false white beard and a red dwarf's cap. He is especially protective about Nurse White whom he calls "Snow White", a nickname which has stuck.
- White Nurse White has got black hair, a pale face and very red lips. She is dressed in a nurse's uniform, i.e. a white coat, like all the other nurses as well. She is not happy about her nickname "Snow White".

- Doctor Dr Flora Campbell is a medical doctor. She works at the asylum and is probably in love with the director. She can play the piano and often accompanies La Diva in her singing.
- Holmes He is the seventh patient. He thinks he is Sherlock Holmes. He is being committed to the asylum this very evening by one of his daughters.
- Grant Inspector Grant is a member of the Scottish Highland Police Force. He has been sent to investigate the murders at the asylum. He is wearing civilian clothes with a raincoat and hat. He is not very happy about his new colleague – and he shows it.
- Soames Miss Soames, a police constable fresh from police school, is his assistant. She is in uniform. She is an eager, young woman and ready to give her best. So she is not very happy about her boss, Inspector Grant, who treats her in a very condescending way.

The story takes place in Dr McLeod's very posh, very expensive and very exclusive mental asylum in Killin, a secluded small village in the Scottish Highlands. There is only one setting, namely the asylum's large common room which is used for therapies and meals with a window opening out into a nice, well-kept garden. Next to it is Dr McLeod's small office, furnished with a small desk with a telephone, two chairs, a bookshelf with lots of books and a couch with a pillow.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

As the curtain opens we see a large room with a window opening out into the garden. It could be a lounge or a dining-room. In the foreground there are two chairs facing away from the audience at an angle of about 45 degrees. Three small tables with chairs have been pushed to one side and into the background. There is a drinks trolley with some bottles and glasses which is almost hidden by the rest of the furniture.

On the left-hand side of the stage there is a second, smaller room, obviously used as an office.

There are four people on the stage: Nurse Jane, dressed in white, with a clipboard in her hand, acting as the director of a play; Julius Caesar, dressed in a toga with a gun in his hand; Adolf Hitler with a top-hat on his head, linking arms with La Diva, wearing gloves and carrying her handbag. Three more patients are sitting in the front row of the audience: Marilyn Monroe, Mary, Queen of Scots and Happy, one of the Seven Dwarfs, with his typical cap. During the following scene Queen Mary takes little sips from a bottle, which she elaborately hides after every swig.

Jane O.K., let's start again. *(She reads from the script on her clipboard)* **The President and his wife enter the theatre. They walk to their seats; Lincoln waves to the audience before he sits down, and then the play begins.**
At this moment, the murderer, John Wilkes Booth, *(she looks up)* that's you, Caesar, sneaks in, aims, fires his gun and shouts "Long live slavery!"

Marilyn *(stands up)* Oh, Nurse Jane, why can't I play La Diva's part? I'd love to act the First Lady. I know the part, I used to flirt with American presidents.

Jane But the Director wants La Diva to be the President's wife. It's all part of her therapy, you know, dear.

La Diva Nurse, that's the third time you've called me "La Diva" this afternoon. This simply won't do! You know that I'm Cecilia Bartoli, the great opera singer. So, please, address me correctly!

Jane I'm sorry, Mrs Bartoli.

La Diva Anyway, I'm not going to play any American president's wife. I'm a great and famous opera singer. And I won't take part in this stupid little farce of yours – except you let me sing. *(She turns to the audience and starts singing "Mein Herr Marquis" by Florence Foster Jenkins)*

Hitler *(He covers his ears with both hands)* No, no, no! Can't you shut her up? You know I only listen to Richard Wagner!

Jane Please, ladies and gentlemen. I'm just trying to follow Dr Mc Leod's orders.

La Diva Okay, I'll tell him. And now let's give Marilyn her chance.

(She bows to the other patients, then to the audience and leaves the stage. Marilyn blows her a kiss, walks up to the stage, hips swinging, and takes her place)

Jane All right, all right, so can we start now? *(She steps off the stage)*
Lincoln, please!

(Hitler and Marilyn walk to the two chairs; Hitler rather stiffly, Marilyn in quite a provocative way. He looks at the audience, then raises his arm in the Nazi salute and barks)

Hitler Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!

(Jane jumps onto the stage again and shouts)

Jane Not again! Stop that bloody nonsense. You're Abraham Lincoln now.

Hitler I'm sorry, I forgot. *(He clicks his heels and turns to Marilyn.)* Come on, madam, let's try again.

(Jane stays on the stage but steps to one side. She reads from her script again.)

Jane Ready? ***The President and his wife enter the theatre. They walk to their seats; Lincoln waves to the audience before he sits down, and then the play begins.***

(Hitler and Marilyn do exactly what Jane says, walking in the same exaggerated way as before. Jane signals Caesar to come in.)

Jane ***At this moment the murderer, John Wilkes Booth, sneaks in, aims, fires his gun and shouts:***

Caesar *(He does not sneak in but tramples in.)* Peng, peng, peng! Veni, vidi, vici!

Jane *(She shouts angrily)* No, no, no! Don't forget your lines. You shout: ***"Long live slavery!"***

Caesar Me Hercule! Show me that text again.

(Jane shows him the text.)

Caesar Hm, you're right. Let's do it again.

(Both go back to their positions.)

Jane *(reads)* ***At this moment the murderer, John Wilkes Booth, sneaks in, aims, fires his gun and shouts:***

Caesar *(He tramples in again.)* Peng, peng, peng! Long live slavery!

Hitler *(He clutches his head and falls off the chair.)* I'm dying! Long live the Reich – err – the USA!

Marilyn Oh dear, they've killed him.

Jane *(interrupts)* O.K., let's have a break. Tea in five minutes, then one more rehearsal.

(All the patients leave. Queen Mary, who walks up from the audience with Happy, under protest. Nurses Black und White come in and help Jane prepare the room for tea.)

Queen And where is my part? Why can these stupid commoners act, and I, Queen Mary of Scots, just have to sit and watch this miserable performance?

Jane You'll be in the next scene, Your Majesty!

(The Director, Dr Mc Leod, enters.)

SCENE 2

Director Well, Jane, how is it going?

Jane Badly. They don't learn their lines and they can't act. Hitler is simply awful. He always plays Hitler. And - La Diva simply walked out on me. So Marilyn is taking her part, if this is okay.

Director That's fine. La Diva has informed me. Well, Jane, you simply have to be patient. Your actors are all difficult cases. But acting is a good therapy for them. Anyway, let's have a nice cup of tea now.

(Nurse Black strikes a gong.)

Black Tea time!

(One after the other the patients are trickling in. Hitler and Caesar share the table on the right. La Diva, Happy and the Director sit at the table in the centre and Queen Mary and Marilyn sit at the table on the left. As they come in they say a few words.)

Hitler Sieg Heil!

Director Well, well, Adolf.....

Caesar Ave, Director, imperator te salutat!

Director Salve imperator. Ready for a nice cuppa?

La Diva Can I have a word with you, Director?

Director Certainly, Diva.

La Diva Ah, you've done it again! You know I'm Edita Gruberova, the great opera singer. Now you must grant me a favour. I'd like to sing an aria in that stupid play of Nurse Jane's.

Director Stupid play! I've written it myself!

La Diva Oh, I'm sorry. Now about that aria ...?

Marilyn *(bursts a bubble of chewing gum)* Can I have a drink?

Director Oh Marilyn, you naughty, naughty girl!

Queen *(to the Director)* Fetch me another chair and a cushion! But be quick, or I'll have your head chopped off!

Director Yes of course, Your Majesty. *(He exchanges her chair with one from Hitler's table.)*
There you are, madam.

(Black brings in a pillow. As Queen Mary is making herself comfortable Happy enters.)

Happy Where is she? I can't see her. *(Happy sits down on the Director's chair at the central table)*

Marilyn I said I wanted a drink, not a lousy cup of muddy hot water!

Black But you know, you mustn't drink, love.

Marilyn Bring me a Bloody Mary, or my manager's going to fire you!

Queen How dare you call me "Bloody Mary"? I'm Mary, Queen of Scots. Guards, take her away and chop off her head!

Marilyn Have mercy, Your Majesty.

Queen All right, you can finish your tea first. *(to Nurse Black)* And bring me a new bottle of that stuff. *(She burps and throws away the bottle which she has obviously emptied in the meantime.)*

Black But Your Majesty, what have you done?

Queen Emptied a bottle – out of frustration! I was sitting there and nobody paid any attention!

Happy Who's been sitting on my chair? Who's been eating from my plate? Who's been drinking from my cup? *(Nurse White enters with a pot of tea. As soon as Happy sees her he jumps up enthusiastically)* Snow White!
(He runs to her, jumps up at her and tries to kiss her. She is just able to put the pot down in time and fight him off)

White I'm not Snow White, Happy. I'm Nurse White. Now be a good boy, go back to your seat, and I'll pour you a nice cup of tea.

(He walks back to his chair dejectedly and she pours his tea before she leaves again.)

Hitler I say, Caesar, that woman's a Jewess, isn't she?

Caesar Well, she could be. She looks exactly like one of my slaves from Palestine.

Hitler What's she doing here?

Caesar Serving meals, and other slave duties.

Hitler No, no, she's a secret agent. I'm sure the Jewish underground has sent her to kill me. Tell the Gestapo to arrest her and to send her to a camp!

La Diva And how was your day, Happy?

Happy Not very happy. I must look after Snow White. You know, the Wicked Queen wants to see her dead because Snow White is more beautiful than her.

Queen Do you say I'm a wicked queen? Guards, send him to the Tower and chop off his head!

Happy Do you want to kill Snow White?

Queen Why should I?

Happy Then you are a good queen. But look at the man over there, with the moustache. He wants to kill her. I'm sure, the Wicked Queen has sent him. *(He shouts towards Hitler)*
Don't you touch Snow White, or I'll kill you.

Hitler *(to Caesar)* I see, "Snow White" must be her code name. Send Himmler to me at once.

Dr Flora Campbell enters and looks around for a free chair. She moves over to Hitler's table where she sits down.)

La Diva Hello, Dr Campbell. Why don't you sit with us? *(She pushes Happy from his chair)*
Get lost. Don't you see this seat is taken? *(Happy gets up with a lot of groaning and sits down at Hitler's table)*

Doctor That wasn't very nice.

La Diva He wasn't very nice either. Look Doctor, couldn't you accompany me on the piano in Dr McLeod's wonderful play? He promised to let me sing an aria.

Doctor But of course, no problem.

Director *(to himself)* Well, perhaps the Mad Scene from Lucia di Lammermoor!

Happy Who's been sitting on my chair? Who's been eating from my plate? Who's been drinking from my cup?

(Snow White enters, carrying a cake on a tray. As soon as Happy sees her he runs to her, jumps up at her - and the cake is squashed on her bosom and falls down.)

Happy Snow White!

White *(She is really angry now)* Oh, you crazy freak, you bloody fool! Can't you leave me alone for just one second? Look what you've done!

La Diva *(to the Director)* I ask you, who's mad here? We or that silly girl who drops the cake instead of serving it?

Director You're quite right, my dear Diva.

La Diva I'm not your "dear Diva". I'm Maria Callas, the greatest opera singer in history! Clean up that mess, girls. - Dr Campbell, the grand piano is waiting!

(She stands up and walks over to the grand piano. Dr Campbell follows her and sits down at the piano)

Queen Servants these days aren't worth a penny.

(Jane enters)

Jane Has everybody finished? Fine. Let's put the tables away and then get on with our rehearsal!

Director *(turns to Nurse Black)* Come on, Blackie, give me a hand.

Black Stop it right there, Director. School days are over, and you know I hate that name. Either you call me Rose or Nurse Black!

Director Just a little joke, so don't get mad at me.

(Dr McLeod and Nurse Black, Nurse Jane and Nurse White rearrange the room for the rehearsal, while Dr Campbell is playing the piano and La Diva is singing "Mein Herr Marquis" by Florence Foster Jenkins completely out of tune. The five other patients step off the stage and sit in the front row of the audience.

(When the room is ready Dr McLeod and Nurses Black and White leave.)

Hitler (stands up, covers his ears with both hands and turns to the audience) That woman is killing me with her singing. Can't anybody stop her?

SCENE 3

Jane (walks over to La Diva and Dr Campbell) That's quite enough. Thank you for your wonderful singing.

La Diva You're welcome, Jane. Let's polish it in my room, Dr Campbell.

(La Diva bows to Jane and the audience, then she and Dr Campbell leave together)

Jane Thank God, she's gone. *(to the other patients)* Let's start. *(Hitler, Caesar and Marilyn come back on stage.)*
Have you got your things? Hitler, where's your top-hat?

Hitler It's here.

Jane And your gun, Caesar?

Caesar *(He has to look for it first)* Ah, here it is.

Jane Fine. Let's do the last scene again. *(He looks at Hitler and Marilyn)* Now you two, remember who you are. Hitler, don't move so stiffly, and Marilyn, you're the First Lady, so don't wiggle your arse like a hooker.
And Caesar, I want to see your sneaking first.

(Caesar again tramples in)

Hitler You see? He can't sneak. He thinks he's a great soldier and he can't even sneak!
Walks like a herd of bloody elephants. And can't sneak! *(he laughs)*

Caesar *(gets angry and points his gun at Hitler)* Shut up, you German Kraut, or I'll shoot you!

Jane You can shoot him later. Look, I'll show you how to do it, Caesar.
(She puts down her clipboard, takes his gun and shows him how she wants him to sneak)
See? *(She returns the gun to Caesar, takes her clipboard and reads)*

The President and his wife enter the theatre. They walk to their seats; Lincoln waves to the audience before he sits down and then the play begins.

(While Jane is reading Hitler and Marilyn walk to their chairs. They try to walk more naturally and almost succeed. When they reach their chairs, Hitler offers her one, turns to the audience and raises

his arm for the Nazi salute. But he remembers just in time and quickly changes his gesture into a stiff wave.)

Hitler Heil-(hel)lo!

Jane ***At this moment, the murderer, John Wilkes Booth, sneaks in, aims, fires his gun and shouts:***

Caesar *(does quite a nice sneaking now)* Peng, peng, peng!

(At the last „peng“ he presses the trigger and there is a real shot from his gun this time)

Caesar Veni, vidi, vici!

(Hitler clutches his breast with both hands, blood is seeping through his fingers und he sinks to the floor.)

Marilyn *(screams)* Look at the blood! It's all over my beautiful new dress!

Caesar Ha, I've got him alright this time.

(Jane and the patients from the audience run to Hitler who is lying on the floor, motionless)

Jane What have you done, Caesar? You've killed Hitler!

Caesar No, I haven't, I've killed Lincoln.

Jane Why did you do that?

Caesar Because you told me so, remember?

(The Director is running in)

Director What was that?

Queen *(pointing at Caesar, who has still got the gun in his hand)* He's shot Lincoln.

Director But why on earth would you do something crazy like that, Caesar?

Caesar Nurse Jane has told me to shoot him. She said, it's part of my therapy.

Happy Don't worry, Director, he isn't the American president, you know. They were only acting.

Director But Hitler isn't acting, he's dead!

Caesar So what? Hitler was a monster. He killed 6 million Jews! He told me so himself.

Happy And he wanted to kill Snow White, too. I overheard him at tea.

Caesar That's right. He wanted to send her to a camp.

Queen So it was about time somebody did him in. Well done, Caesar! *(She kicks the body)*

The world's a better place without Hitler. I'll drink to that!

(She walks over to the drinks trolley and helps herself to a drink. Nurses Black and White enter.)

Black What's the noise?

White What's happened?

Queen Caesar has rid us of Hitler. Cheers! *(She raises her glass)*

(Black and White finally see Hitler's body)

Black Oh, my God!

White What is it, Rose? Is he dead?

Caesar But of course – a perfect shot! - And he said I wasn't a soldier, ha!

Marilyn Look, I'm full of blood. Oh, that horrible man, he's ruined my dress.

Director Blackie, fetch Doctor Campbell, quick.

Black *(with an angry face)* Yes, massah.

(She quickly leaves.)

Director And Snow White, err, Nurse White, please take the patients to their rooms.

White Of course, sir.

Caesar What? Leave the battlefield after my glorious victory?

White Come on, dears, let's go to your rooms.

Happy *(takes her hand like a small child)* Oh, Snow White, what a wonderful day. Your enemy is dead, and you're safe. Let's go and celebrate.

White Yes, yes, Happy. *(Snow White and the patients leave.)*

Director Jane, help me with Hitler.

(They carry him to the centre of the stage and put him down. Nurse Black returns with Doctor Campbell. La Diva follows them expectantly.)

Doctor What's the problem, Director?

Director The problem's lying here, Doctor Campbell. A tragic accident during the rehearsals. He was shot by accident - with an unloaded gun.

Doctor But not another accident! Listen, this is the fifth accident in two weeks! Let me see:
Number one: Napoleon: fell down the stairs and broke his neck.
Number two: Mme Curie: blew herself up in her laboratory.
Number three: Lord Nelson: drowned in his bath.

Number four: Marie-Antoinette: smashed by a Robespierre bust.
And now, number five: Hitler: shot with an unloaded gun.
Have you called the police?

Director The police? Why call the police? Accidents do happen, Doctor. Just fill in your forms and then we'll bury him. We don't want the police, do we?

Doctor I'm sorry, I can't do that. You say it's an accident. Okay, that's possible, but it's manslaughter all the same - and it could even be murder.

Black Do be serious, Doctor. Who'd want to kill those poor people? They're harmless. Okay, they're a bit over the top, but is that reason enough to murder anyone?

Doctor I haven't asked for your opinion, Nurse!

Director I think Nurse Black is absolutely right. But, if you insist, Doctor Campbell, ...?
(Dr Campbell nods her head vigorously)
Okay, would you please inform the police, Rose?

Black Yes, sir. *(She walks to the office next door, takes the phone and dials)*

Jane But what if Happy really thought Hitler wanted to kill Snow White and exchanged the bullets?

Director Oh, come on, Jane. You don't believe that yourself, do you?

Black Is that the police? This is Nurse Black from Dr McLeod's hospital for the mentally handicapped in Killin. I'm afraid I have to report a tragic accident. One of our patients was killed by a fellow patient. So can you send one of your detectives?
- No, no, there's no hurry.
- Thank you, sir, and good-bye.

(While Nurse Black is speaking to the police, La Diva is singing to herself)

La Diva Killing him softly with this shot,
Killing him softly right now.
Killing him softly with this shot,
Killing in Killin – with this shot
Killing him softly, with this shot
Killing in Killin, with this shot.

(As the curtain falls, La Diva bows to the audience until the curtain is completely closed)

CURTAIN