

THE FOREST OF THE DEAD

a comic thriller

by L. Don Swartz

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*To Paul Koszelak
for believing in Chestnut Hollow*

STORY OF THE PLAY

It is the summer of 1999. As the world teeters on the brink of a new age, a cold-blooded killer stalks Hangman's Grove, the dark woods surrounding Chestnut Hollow. As the body count rises, three families, drawn into the Sheriff's investigation refuse to accept the possibility that the murderer is one of their own. A group of young friends, abandoned by the rational-thinking adults, are left alone to confront Chestnut Hollow's most sinister secret. Shadowy subjects haunt Hangman's Grove. **THE FOREST OF THE DEAD** tells its suspenseful tale with Hitchcockian touches and a dash of dark humor.

THE FOREST OF THE DEAD was originally produced by the Ghostlight Theatre Company at the Grant Street Theatre in North Tonawanda, New York on October 14, 1999. It was directed by L. Don Swartz. The set designer was Chris Fire and the stage manager was Julie Senko. The cast in order of appearance, was:

ARLO GRUBB.....Michael Leszczynski
MIRANDA GRUBB.....Cheri Shively Pieszak
CHANCE MAGRADY.....L. Don Swartz
KELLY BARTLETT JOHNSON.....Debby Koszelak Swartz
APRIL CARPENTER.....Leah Kingston
HOLLY JOHNSON.....Sarah Averill
TREVOR CARPENTER.....Chris Fire
MRS. BARTLETT.....Patricia Faulhaber
VINCENT GREY.....Bob Tomasini
SHERIFF JAKE WATKINS.....Jesse Swartz
AUTUMN CARPENTER WATKINS.....JoAnn V. Mis
DR. MELODY PEARCE.....Marcheta Wright
CARL MURPHY.....Larry Norton
BECKY.....Kathy Ellis Donner/Lauren Doan
SAM.....Julie Senko

CAST OF CHARACTERS (6 m, 8 w)

ARLO GRUBB: 60 years old. A gravedigger. Friend to everyone. Lately, nightmares of impending doom have been haunting him. A man with many secrets.

MIRANDA GRUBB: 60 years old. A nurse. Married to Arlo for 25 years. Troubled by his night-terrors. Strong.

CHANCE MAGRADY: Miranda's adult son, 43 years old. A gravedigger. Friendly. Marches to his own drumbeat. Killed his stepfather 30 years ago in self-defense and is still haunted.

KELLY BARTLETT JOHNSON: 43 years old. A teacher. Recently divorced and raising a teenage daughter. Torn between family and career.

HOLLY JOHNSON: Kelly's 16-year-old daughter. An outsider. Quiet. Smart. Recovering from her parent's divorce. Searching for a home.

MRS. BARTLETT: Kelly's mother and Holly's grandmother, 60 years old. A church matron who is prone to short-sightedness and hysteria. Lonely. A widow for 35 years.

APRIL CARPENTER: 15 years old. A tomboy. Adventure seeker. Gabby and resourceful. Not to be crossed. She has trouble adjusting to her stepfather, the town's sheriff.

TREVOR CARPENTER: 16 years old. Friendly and gullible. Energetic. Prankster. Rolls with the punches.

SHERIFF JACOB WATKINS: In his 40s. A working man's sheriff. His by-the-book approach causes him to miss important clues to the murderer's identity. A man with a temper who is trying to adjust to instant parenthood of two wild teenagers, April and Trevor.

AUTUMN CARPENTER WATKINS: In her 40s. A lovable klutz of a mother to April and Trevor and wife to the Sheriff. She would do anything to make her new family work. Haunted by dreams of her dead mother, she has all the clues to the killer's identity.

VINCENT GREY: A handyman, in his 30s. Likable and efficient. No family.

DR. MELODY PEARCE: 30/40 years old. Very skilled medical doctor. Ruthless and ambitious, she uses a scalpel to carve out her fame.

CARL MURPHY: Adult talk radio personality with a vendetta against the Sheriff. Pushy.

BECKY: (Adult) Carl's assistant. The 14th character, her one-line appearance keeps the play from having 13 characters ... which is unlucky.

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SETTING: The Grubb and Bartlett backyards, behind the Chestnut Hollow Cemetery, in upstate New York.

TIME: The present.

SYNOPSIS:

ACT I

Prologue: June 15th, midnight.

Scene 1: The next day, at dusk.

Scene 2: A week later, early evening.

Scene 3: Three weeks later, late afternoon.

Scene 4: Mid-July, at night.

Scene 5: A week later, at night.

ACT II

Prologue: That night.

Scene 1: The next day, afternoon.

Scene 2: Three days later, at night.

Scene 3: Four days later.

Scene 4: A week later, late at night.

Scene 5: Three days later, a sunny afternoon.

Epilogue: Late August, morning.

THE SET

Adjoining backyards of the BARTLETT and GRUBB houses in Chestnut Hollow. The back porches of both houses are visible. There are steps leading up to the Bartlett porch, stage left, and a wooden railing surrounding the porch. A screen door leads to the kitchen. Both a first and second story window are visible. Stage right is the Grubb porch, a shabby, low, narrow porch without any steps. A screen door leads to a back hall. A first story window is visible. A pathway between the houses leads upstage to an iron fence that separates the two yards from the cemetery. There is an opening in the fence. There are tombstones visible. DSL in the Bartlett yard is a low brick fire pit. DSR in the Grubb yard is an old picnic table, and a tree stump, center.

See end of script for props list, sound effects, and additional production notes.

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Prologue

(AT RISE: It is June 15th. Midnight. Inside the Grubb house we hear a scream. The back door bangs open and ARLO stumbles out onto the porch. He is dressed in pajamas. Something that terrifies him is right behind him. He crosses to the center of the yard. He races into the graveyard. Seeing something in the graveyard, he crosses back to the yard. From the dark side of the Bartlett house, the thing that only Arlo can see, charges at him. Frozen in his tracks, he begins to scream. His wife MIRANDA and his stepson CHANCE, charge out of the house to his aid. From the Bartlett house, KELLY also rushes to Arlo. As they reach him, the roar of a nearby train drowns out their cries. Arlo, seemingly sleepwalking, wakes up. Miranda puts her arm around him and gently leads him into the house. The train is gone.)

KELLY: How long has Arlo been doing this?

CHANCE: Couple months.

KELLY: I got to talk to him about getting some help.

CHANCE: He won't.

KELLY: It's scary.

CHANCE: Tell me about it.

KELLY: What is he so afraid of?

CHANCE: He won't say. *(Pause.)* It's so hot.

KELLY: What?

CHANCE: It's hot.

KELLY: Yes, it is.

CHANCE: This summer is supposed to be a hot one.

KELLY: That's what I heard. Good night.

CHANCE: Good night.

(THEY both exit into their houses. HE glances at HER, and she at him, peeking out the window. BLACKOUT.)

End of Prologue

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: The next day. Dusk. APRIL CARPENTER and HOLLY JOHNSON, appear in the cemetery.)

APRIL: The most active ghost in this cemetery is Tobias Black. Some nights you can see him searching for his head with a lantern.

HOLLY: Oh, really?

APRIL: I've seen him. That concludes the tour of the cemetery. *(THEY cross into the GRUBB yard.)* Right on this very spot, thirty years ago, the man who lives in this house, Chance Magrady, shot his stepfather, Otis Pratt, to death. Chance was just 13 years old. It was a fairly standard domestic that got out of control. Surely your mother told you about it.

HOLLY: I don't believe she ever mentioned it.

APRIL: Your mother witnessed it. The way I heard it, she was standing close enough to be splattered with old man Pratt's blood. Yes, splattered. There are some in this town who say Otis Pratt wanders the graveyard, a bloody horror, seeking revenge. Whatever the case, it screwed up Mr. Magrady. Right after he shot his stepfather, he was sent to an insane asylum. The least little thing can trigger a psychotic episode. Now he buries dead people for a living. You would be well-advised to keep away from him. We've come full circle. See across the railroad tracks, there's my house again.

HOLLY: Oh, yes, of course.

APRIL: Two Halloweens ago, my stepfather, my Gram Doobie, and my brother Norman, set a trap and caught the Hatchetman. The Hatchetman is this town's most notorious serial killer. He butchered 10 people with an ax. Later that night, Gram passed away.

HOLLY: I'm sorry.

APRIL: That's just this neighborhood. Tomorrow I'll show you the spooky side of town.

HOLLY: Spooky?

APRIL: Welcome to Chestnut Hollow.

(TREVOR enters.)

End of Freeview

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