

FRIGHT NIGHT

Three Tales of Terror

By L. Don Swartz

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Dedication

*In memory of Tom Bergman for setting the standard of
excellence I'm still trying to achieve.*

*The Playwright,
L. Don Swartz*

STORY OF THE PLAY

Fright Night consists of three one-act tales of horror. Both of the classics, "The Monkey's Paw," by W. W. Jacobs, and "The Tell-Tale Heart," by Edgar Allan Poe, have been dramatized and updated here. The third tale, "Midnight Wax," is an original play by L. Don Swartz.

"The Monkey's Paw" tells the story of a family destroyed by a grisly talisman that promises to grant three wishes. The "Tell-Tale Heart" is set in the contemporary American judicial system where clinical experts delve too deeply into a killer's scarred psyche, only to discover that the motiveless murder is anything but. "Midnight Wax" is the story of an ambitious reporter who agrees to spend the night alone in a wax museum to write a Halloween piece, only to discover that she is not the only one in the museum with a secret.

FRIGHT NIGHT was originally produced by the Ghostlight Theatre Company at the Grant Street Theatre in North Tonawanda, NY, on October 16, 1997. The production, which consisted of three original one-act plays, was directed by Chris Fire, Scott Lesinski and L. Don Swartz.

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THE TELL-TALE HEART

A mystery in one act
Based on the short story by Edgar Allan Poe
Adapted by L. Don Swartz

STORY OF THE PLAY

The familiar Edgar Allan Poe short story is updated here, set in the modern American judicial system. As part of a competency hearing to determine the suspect's mental ability to stand trial, the caged murderer faces a panel of legal and psychological experts as his confession is videotaped for all to see. As the experts probe deeper into the killer's psyche, the apparently motiveless murder starts to come into focus, and we discover the victim's "evil eye" was just the tip of the iceberg. One interior set.

"THE TELL-TALE HEART" was originally was directed by Chris Fire. The cast in order of appearance was as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>OFFICER GRISWOLD</i> | <i>Carl Tamburlin</i> |
| <i>OFFICER GRAHAM</i> | <i>Michael Leszczynski</i> |
| <i>COUNSELOR VALDEMAR</i> | <i>Andras Brem</i> |
| <i>DR. TARR</i> | <i>Gelia Woodward</i> |
| <i>PROFESSOR FETHER</i> | <i>Julie Senko</i> |
| <i>PROSECUTOR BLOOD</i> | <i>JoAnn Mis</i> |
| <i>MR. BLACKWOOD</i> | <i>L. Don Swartz</i> |

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 m, 3 w)

OFFICER GRISWOLD: (M) Intimidating physically.

OFFICER GRAHAM: (M) Good with a video camera.

COUNSELOR VALDEMAR: (M) Slick. Dramatic. Very good at what he does.

DR. TARR: (W) A sensitive psychologist. More interested in feeling over fact.

PROFESSOR FETHER: (W) A hard-boiled academic. Sticks with the facts. Skeptical.

PROSECUTOR BLOOD: (W) Intense. Direct. Sometimes fierce. A woman with a cause.

MR. BLACKWOOD: (M) A highly intelligent murderer. Not to be trusted.

TIME: The present.

PLACE: A basement conference room in the Municipal Courthouse, Boston.

COSTUMES – PROPS

OFFICER GRISWOLD: Prison guard uniform; gray pants, white shirt, gray tie, black shoes. Gun holster with gun, cuffs, billy club, badge. Carries a key for the cage in his shirt pocket.

OFFICER GRAHAM: Same as Griswold. Carries a key for room door in his pocket. Handles video camera.

COUNSELOR VALDEMAR: Expensive dark suit and shoes, white shirt. Carries a file of the crime photos with him. It is important that he place Griswold's room key in his suit coat pocket, so that Blackwood could presumably steal it when he grabs him through the bars.

DR. TARR: Matching skirt and jacket, bright blouse, sensible shoes. Soft hair style. Uses reading glasses. Carries a leather-bound file on the suspect. Expensive pen.

PROFESSOR FETHER: Dark pant suit, man's tie, mannish black shoes, black academic glasses. Hair pulled back in a screaming bun. Severe looking briefcase. Clicky pens.

PROSECUTOR BLOOD: Scarlet-colored dress with matching pumps, black decorative neck scarf with brooch and gold bracelets. Attractive hairstyle. Carries a small leather bag to hold papers, files, pens.

MR. BLACKWOOD: Orange or red prison scrubs: linen pants and short-sleeved shirt, like a hospital nurse would wear. No shoes or socks. (He needs to be bright in the cage.) Real handcuffs work best, with a long enough chain so that he can reach out through the bars. In the original production the two keys he needs at the end of the scene were hidden in the cage as the actor was worried they would fall out, if hidden on his costume.

SETTING

A conference room in the basement of the City of Boston Municipal Courthouse. There is a long table SL with three chairs angled towards the audience. There is a sturdy metal cage, with a locking door SR. Seven-foot high by three-foot wide, it resembles the kind of structure one might find at the zoo to temporarily house a medium-sized animal. CS is a metal cart with a large television screen on it. The only door to the room is SL behind the table.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

A note on the set: We built the cage out of conduit pipe, (cheap and light) and placed it on a rolling platform. The cage was 3'x7' with a wooden floor and barred top. We spray painted the pipe silver. Table and cage must be set on extreme opposite sides of the playing area so that even the audience in the back row has to ping-pong their heads to follow the action, forcing them to drag their eyes across the stage every time someone else talks. As the interview becomes heated, this process makes the audience increasingly on edge.

Use of television and camera: It is important to place the screen directly center and directly at the audience. We were expecting glare from the stage lights, but there was none. The bigger the screen the better. It is important that Blackwood only look at the camera at the two spots indicated. The first time he looks directly at the audience as he is describing the murder we got an audible gasp from the audience every time. It gives the illusion that he is looking right at them. The actor playing Graham must be good with the camera. The dynamic use of the camera and screen provides constant movement to staging that could become static.

The Tell-Tale Heart

(AT RISE: We hear a key in the lock of the door. The door opens and GRISWOLD and GRAHAM enter. Graham carries a video camera. Griswold crosses to the cage and tests the bars for strength.)

GRISWOLD: This ought to hold him.

GRAHAM: It better hold him. Did you see the pictures of what he did?

GRISWOLD: I seen it.

(COUNSELOR VALDEMAR enters.)

VALDEMAR: *(Inspecting the cage.)* Perfect. Perfect. Go get the defendant. Graham, put that camera down and help him. Leave the handcuffs on him. Don't ever forget who you're dealing with.

GRISWOLD: No, sir.

VALDEMAR: I'll let the panel in. Don't bring Blackwood in here until I give you the signal.

GRISWOLD: Yes, sir. *(The GUARDS exit.)*

VALDEMAR: *(Sticking HIS head out the door.)* Dr. Tarr? Professor Fether? Prosecutor Blood? You may come in now.

(TARR peeks HER head in the door.)

DR. TARR: *(Spying the cage.)* Oh, my goodness. *(SHE sits at the table and opens her notebook.)*

PROF. FETHER: *(Enters. SHE looks at the cage and sniffs.)* Counselor Valdemar, is this measure really necessary?

(PROSECUTOR BLOOD enters. She slams her notebook on the table.)

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BLOOD: Counselor Valdemar, this time you've gone too far. Dr. Tarr, Professor Fether, I trust you'll overlook the good counselor's theatrics, and not let them influence your final decision. Counselor Valdemar, must I remind you that this is the final phase of a competency hearing for your client? The City of Boston's prosecutor's office is paying good money for our highly qualified experts, Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether. We don't have time to play these kinds of mind games.

VALDEMAR: Thank you, Ms. Blood, for the input. I shall take it in advisement. Dr. Tarr, Professor Fether, good to meet you. I'm familiar with your work and I trust that after witnessing my client's confession today, you will agree with the defense's panel of experts that Mr. Blackwood is mentally and emotionally deranged and unfit to stand trial for his crime.

PROF. FETHER: From what I've seen so far of the defendant's profile, this security measure does seem a bit extreme. You can be sure that I will make my final judgment based on the facts and the facts alone.

VALDEMAR: Very good, Professor Fether. Have you seen the photographs of the crime scene?

BLOOD: No, they have not. I didn't think it was necessary.

VALDEMAR: Of course you didn't think it was necessary, Prosecutor Blood. Why cloud the issue with the facts? Before I jump into the water, I usually like to know just how deep I'm getting in. Take a look at these. *(HE throws a file of photos on the table. They spill out. TARR and FETHER look through them.)* That's my personal favorite. You'll have to excuse the sheer number of photographs. I understand they were taken as the body parts were discovered. Think of it as a puzzle, if you will. With enough patience and a large roll of Scotch tape, you could probably reassemble a single photo of the victim.

BLOOD: That is enough, Counselor.

VALDEMAR: Is it? Dr. Tarr, Professor Fether, as you look at these photographs, do you want the man who did this sitting across the table from you?

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VALDEMAR: *(Cont'd. THEY both shake their heads.)* I thought not. That is why I took the liberty of requesting the cage. You need to be asking yourselves, is it really conceivable that a sane human being could do something like this. Dr. Tarr, Professor Fether, with all due respect, proceed very carefully. You've never been in this deep. *(HE leaves the photos on the table.)*

BLOOD: Can we bring in the defendant, now? Or is this where the dancing girls come out?

VALDEMAR: In a minute. I want your panel to understand that this hearing is against the expressed wishes of my client. Mr. Blackwood is unwilling to be declared mentally incompetent. He is willing to accept the death penalty for the crime he has committed. You'd think a man facing the death penalty would be eager for any stay of execution. Ultimately, the final analysis is in your capable hands. If there are no other questions, I will bring Mr. Blackwood in now. Be forewarned, in the unlikely event that he attempts an escape during this interview process, the guards' instructions are shoot-to-kill. Without a moment's hesitation. Is that clear? *(THEY nod.)* All right then. I'll bring in Mr. Blackwood. *(Sticking HIS head out the door.)* Guards.

(The GUARDS enter escorting BLACKWOOD. He wears handcuffs. Blackwood looks around timidly. He smiles at the others. Griswold unlocks the cage and pushes Blackwood in. He locks the door and places the key in his pocket. He stands at attention on the SR side of the cage. Blackwood tests the resolve of each side of the cage. Graham turns on the television screen and plugs in the camera. He scans the room to make sure the equipment is working properly. He turns the camera on VALDEMAR.)

GRAHAM: We're all set, sir.

VALDEMAR: Okay. Here we go. *(Speaking directly into the camera, we see HIS image on the big screen. Looking at the screen, he adjusts his hair.)*

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VALDEMAR: *(Cont'd.)* This is the taped confession of Algernon Blackwood. Present are Prosecutor Blood, from the district attorney's office, and their panel of clinical experts, Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether. *(GRAHAM scans the PANEL.)* This video recording is made with Mr. Blackwood's full consent. Let the hearing begin.

(GRAHAM crouches low, SL of the cage and focuses the camera on the PRISONER'S face. Graham stays on Blackwood throughout the interview.)

PROF. FETHER: Thank you, Counselor Valdemar. Mr. Blackwood, you seem nervous.

BLACKWOOD: *(Peering through the bars HE looks directly at FETHER. He avoids looking directly at the camera.)*

True. Nervous. Very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am. But, why will you say that I am mad?

DR. TARR: Nobody here has said that about you.

BLACKWOOD: The disease had sharpened my senses, not destroyed, not dulled them.

PROF. FETHER: What do you mean by that?

BLACKWOOD: *(Matter-of-fact.)* Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How then am I mad?

DR. TARR: In your own words, tell us what happened.

BLACKWOOD: Hearken, and observe how healthily, how calmly I can tell you the whole story.

PROF. FETHER: Why don't you start at the beginning?

BLACKWOOD: *(Thinking.)* Hmmm. It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived, it haunted me day and night.

PROF. FETHER: Object?

BLACKWOOD: There was none.

DR. TARR: Passion?

BLACKWOOD: There was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire.

DR. TARR: Then, why?

BLACKWOOD: I think it was his eye!

End of Freeview

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