

HANGMAN

By A.W. Richardson, Esq.

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PUBLISHED BY

ELDRIDGE PUBLISHING COMPANY

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Mary Beth Langmeyer is charged with first-degree murder after she shoots her husband with a 12-gauge shotgun while he sleeps. She claims her husband had been physically and emotionally abusive during their marriage, and that she feared for her life if she reported it. The case becomes a battle of personalities between the district attorney and the defense attorney as they both stretch the limits of civility and flirt with contempt charges. Since the state legislature had specifically eliminated the battered wife syndrome defense, the prosecutor scoffs that the plea of self-defense against the sleeping man is ludicrous. For her own part, the defense attorney nearly tells the jury outright to nullify the legislative act and to find Mary Beth justified in taking the husband's life. The jury of five women and one man deliberate the wife's fate, ultimately finding themselves deadlocked along gender lines. In the end, the audience votes as to whether the lone male juror will hold out, thus "hanging" the jury, or vote with the women to acquit Mary Beth.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 M, 7 W, 1 Flexible, optional doubling)

JUDGE CROMWELL: (60s) A mild-mannered man, he seems intimidated and overwhelmed by the attorneys. He wears a white shirt and red tie under his black robe.

BRAD SIMMONS: (35-45) He's brash and arrogant and incredulous at the audacity of the defense. He wears a dark, three-piece pinstriped suit.

SARAH MARTIN-DAVIES: (35-45) Liberal, pushy, and opinionated. She's not about to let the law or the judge get in the way of a successful defense. She wears a navy blue suit and a plain blouse.

MARY BETH LANGMEYER: (24) Defeated by life and her now deceased husband, she awaits her fate with detachment. She wears a plain cotton sundress, bland in color. It fits as if it were a hand-me-down.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: Male or female. A local radio or television personality might make a cameo appearance

AUBRY WOODBINE: (60s) The wife of a prominent banker, she's formal and proper in appearance and demeanor. She serves as foreman of the jury. She wears a conservative but stylish suit, a string of pearls and a small hat.

GLADYS BENSON: (60s) A large, raw-boned coarse woman, who calls them as she sees them. She wears a loose fitting, flowery print dress.

FRANCINE LADUKE: (25-35) Attractive but intellectually challenged. Her opinions are easily and often swayed by those around her. She wears tight slacks or a short skirt with a frilly blouse. Her hair and jewelry are overdone.

CAROL FRANKLIN: (25-35) A wife and the mother of two young children, she has taken a leave of absence from teaching to raise her children. She finds the world of the defendant hard to fathom. She wears a plain skirt and jacket with a colorful blouse.

JEAN PETTYMAN: (40s) An angry, divorced single parent of a teenage son. She works in the same plant where Karl, the defendant's husband, was employed. She wears slacks and a plain, long sleeved blouse buttoned at the collar.

PETER TOWNSEND: (35-45) The lone male on the jury, he quickly finds himself at odds with the female jurors. As an accountant, he tends to be conservative and cautious. He wears a navy sport coat, white shirt with a regimental tie and gray slacks.

(NOTE: If the jury is not seated onstage in Act I, then either of the attorneys, the judge and/or the defendant can double as a member of the jury, if desired. Also, two non-speaking parts can be added to the courtroom scene in Act I. A court reporter behind a transcribing machine and a bailiff could be added. At the time of the closing arguments, the bailiff would place the podium forward CS for use by the attorneys.)

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

ACT I

Scene 1: Courtroom, morning.

Scene 2: Courtroom, later that morning.

ACT II

Scene 1: Jury room, early afternoon.

Scene 2: Jury room, late afternoon.

Scene 3: Jury room, the next morning.

Scene 4: Courtroom.

SETTING

COURT ROOM: A raised judicial bench is centered UPS. Immediately SL of the bench is a witness chair. Forward, both SR and SL, are counsel tables facing each other with two chairs behind each. An American flag in a floor stand is near the judge's bench on the SR side and a state flag in a floor stand is SL. A framed picture of George Washington hangs on the wall behind the bench centered between the flags.

JURY ROOM: Six chairs sit behind a large U-shaped table. Two chairs are placed on each of three sides. A large, framed landscape picture hangs on the rear wall. A coffee machine and a pitcher of water sit on a small table set against the wall SL. There is a door in the wall SR.

PRODUCTION NOTES

There is time near the end of the play to collect and count the ballots. If the audience is extremely large, only a portion of the audience, such as the first five rows, etc., might be designated to receive ballots.

PROPS

Gavel, coffee maker, cups, plastic glasses, water pitcher, purse and name tags. For added realism, borrow official "juror" badges from the clerk of the local court.

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ACT I
Scene 1

(House LIGHTS fade as we hear prerecorded MUSIC. ANNOUNCER enters and sits behind a small table DSR.)

ANNOUNCER: You've been listening to Easy Listening 106. Now for a look at the local news. The murder trial of Mary Beth Langmeyer continues today in Washington County District Court. Mrs. Langmeyer stands accused of shooting her husband, Karl, with a 12-gauge shotgun while he slept. The State rested its case yesterday after County Attorney Bradley Simmons established Karl Langmeyer was killed by a shot from his favorite duck hunting shotgun. Langmeyer told authorities she called 911 after she allegedly shot her husband. She later claimed she shot him in self-defense. Only days before the shooting the state legislature outlawed the battered wife syndrome as a defense to a murder charge. That leaves defense attorney Sarah Martin-Davies with only self-defense to justify her client's actions. Even though District Judge Jonathan Cromwell has ruled testimony concerning the battered wife syndrome will not be received, Ms. Martin-Davies has publicly vowed to ask the jurors to ignore the act of the legislature and accept the defense. We take you now, live, to the courthouse where Ms. Martin-Davies is about to examine her client. *(ANNOUNCER exits with table.)*

End of Freeview

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