

The Joker Fired Twice

By Pat Cook

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STORY OF THE PLAY

"I wasn't expecting anything to happen," intones detective Ace Baxter, "and that's just when anything CAN happen!" And happen it does, as Ace finds himself in a locked room standing in front of the only exit with a murder victim who was shot in the back ... and with Ace's own pistol. Shadows loom large when you're on the lam, as Ace finds out, whether he's disguising himself as a cleaning woman to inspect the scene of the crime, or ducking Sergeant Flint, who's chomping at the bit to clamp the cuffs on Baxter. The Professor helps out when he can, vowing to alert Ace if trouble is at hand. "I shall giggle like a little girl," he tells the less-than-impressed private eye. And when trouble does show its face, it turns out to be a very lovely face, belonging to Lola Cardeza, sultry suspect and owner of a tattoo parlor. Witnesses vanish, police stake out Ace's office building, and everyone, it seems, wants to hire Ace either to tail someone or steal a valuable painting. Confused? So is Ace! Who wouldn't be?

This film-noir spoof is chock-full of the late-night characters that populated Hammett or Chandler crime novels and has more twists than a Danish bakery. With two sets and a cast of eleven, this show will keep your audience guessing, even after they've seen the ending! How will Ace solve the murder? Will they get him before he does? Tune in ... and find out just what *really* happened ... when the joker fired twice!

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 m, 6 w)

ACE BAXTER: Private eye who looks at life from the other side of a wisecrack. Wears a rumbled brown suit.

POLLY: Baxter's gum-chewing secretary who's been around the block more than once.

SGT. ALVIN FLINT: Gritty bulldog of a policeman who misses the old days and old ways.

OFFICER GUNDERSON: Hapless but hopeful assistant to Flint who gets his dialogue from a radio.

SOPHIE: Cleaning woman who does her job and stays away from everything else. Overweight, wears dowdy clothes, thick glasses, and has an unlit cigarette dangling from her lip.

LYLE JOHANSEN: Pompous art dealer who, like his paintings, ends up on the canvas.

PROFESSOR: Bespectacled old gentleman, forever in tweed.

LOLA CARDEZA: Sultry owner of a tattoo parlor with a few designs of her own.

HARRIET FORDYCE: Haughty owner of an art boutique, the Artsy Smartsy, who always looks as if she just smelled a rat.

SARAH TOWNBOY: Mousy apartment manager, who misses the sharps but knows all the flats.

MA FLINT: Alvin's nagging mother who is always looking for something to worry about.

ALSO, Mr. Bower, the corpse. It is suggested that the actor portraying Gunderson should be the same physical size as the actor playing Lyle so that he may double as the corpse (when Lyle pulls him from the closet).

SETTING

Time: The late 1940s.

Place: Lyle Johansen's living room and Ace Baxter's office.

The scene of the crime -- a swank apartment, belonging to Lyle Johansen. The place is full of first-class furniture, first-class accouterments, first class all the way. Dust wouldn't dare enter the place. Two doors allow entrance to and from this showplace and one door to and from a closet. The first, or front door, is located stage right; it leads out to a hall and the real world. The second door, located upstage, leads into the bedroom and bathroom, while the aforementioned closet is located upstage right. On the stage left wall is a large window curtained by expensive-looking ceiling-to-floor drapes. The large sofa rests just left of center stage at an angle. Two heavy wooden end tables nestle under its overhanging arms. An overflowing bookcase languishes against the upstage right wall. A small art deco table, with two matching chairs, sits in the upstage left corner, while a delicate writing desk hugs the stage right wall just below the front door. On the desk is a French-style telephone, writing pad, pen and ink set, and a small black private telephone book.

Around the rest of the room is an assortment of paintings, both legitimate and the other kind as well, along with snooty potted plants and an occasional tapestry or two, just for humor. Chief among the decorations is a large framed painting of a sad clown, located on the DSR wall. A mirror hangs on the DSL wall.

Off to one side is Ace Baxter's office, where there is an old beaten desk with a matching swivel chair. There is a lamp and a telephone on top of the desk, crowded by various notes, papers, bills and collection notices. Another chair sits next to the desk.

ACT I
Scene 1

(AT RISE: Suddenly old-style movie MUSIC plays, the kind that tells everybody something big is about to happen whether they're ready for it or not and leads to a crescendo. A small area is LIT, revealing LYLE standing near his desk and speaking on the telephone.)

LYLE: *(Looking out.)* Please, Mr. Baxter, I implore you. I beseech you. I'm at the end of my wits and am beckoning to you for help. You must come to my apartment tonight! You see ... I'm afraid ... there's going to be a murder!

(BLACKOUT. An ANNOUNCER speaks in a sinister tone.)

ANNOUNCER: And that's how it all started and began -- another case for down-and-out private eye, Ace Baxter! The stage is set, the victim and killer ready to pounce, and Ace gets involved in the murder of a lifetime!

(Another loud MUSIC sting as the LIGHTS come up in Baxter's office to reveal the fair POLLY sitting in a chair looking out.)

POLLY: *(Filing HER nails.)* Don't get me started. I work for Ace Horatio Baxter. He's a private eye. He works me like a horse, calls me up at all hours. He never pays me on time, and when he does, it's sometimes in livestock!

(BLACKOUT on POLLY, again with a musical sting. We hear the ANNOUNCER.)

ANNOUNCER: Lost in his rock'em, sock'em seedy underworld, Ace Baxter has nowhere to turn. His back is up against the wall this time, and no mistake. And suddenly, he's all alone!

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(LIGHTS come up on Lyle's apartment. HARRIET is facing upstage. She quickly turns and faces the audience.)

HARRIET: Mr. Baxter? Yes, an odious little man. You know, the type one sees these days on street corners or in newsreels with tags on their toes. I felt sorry for the man. I gave him a dollar, and he promised he wouldn't go through my garbage anymore.

(Another MUSIC sting. BLACKOUT on HER.)

ANNOUNCER: Now it's up to Ace. Will he find all the clues? Will he find the murderer? Or will the murderer find him? Or maybe, just maybe, he is the murderer. That's right. *This* time ... it's personal!

(LIGHTS come up on Sergeant FLINT as he looks out.)

FLINT: Don't talk to me about Baxter! Talk about a bum?! Talk about a carp, fine! Just don't talk to me! I've been on the force coming up on 15 years, and just once, I'd like to catch him red-handed. Or at least, with his hands clean, anyway. *(HE shrugs.)* He goes through people's garbage!

(A final MUSIC sting.)

ANNOUNCER: You don't make many friends being a private detective. And Ace Baxter doesn't even make acquaintances. And what can you do when you're trying to catch a killer ... *(Ominously.)* ... and the rest of the world is trying to catch *you*! Find out what happens, how Ace Baxter handles the case, and how it all turns out ... after ... the joker fired twice!

(LIGHTS come up to reveal a body covered with a sheet and lying on the floor near the sofa. SERGEANT FLINT is standing near the body, shaking his head and making notes on a pad. Officer GUNDERSON is next to the bookcase.)

End of Freeview

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