

Murder in Manhattan

An original play by Julia Romano

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**PUBLISHED BY
ELDRIDGE PUBLISHING COMPANY**

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DEDICATION

To Fuse, Syniah, Elise, Ella, Zamariana, Zekeil, and Jahbari—you are forever my seniors. And to Kamau Reed—you are an amazing human being, and I am so grateful to know you.

STORY OF THE PLAY

This murder mystery play set in the 1920s opens on a party in full swing at novelist Scarlett Stringfellow's chic Manhattan apartment. All of Scarlett's friends and loved ones--and even a few strangers--are there to celebrate her forthcoming third novel and her impending marriage to Jasper Banks, the son of one of Wall Street's most notorious businessmen. Like all good murder mysteries, the lights cut out, a gun goes off, and the worst person in the room ends up dead. Enter Detective Charlie Dolan, who has to find the murderer amongst a group who can't stop arguing, who don't like snitches, and ... who **all** wanted the victim dead!

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES

The play is set in Manhattan in the 1920s--two topics that excite high school students, especially for costumes. For teachers, the play is great because of the content that aligns with lessons about the negative effects of the Industrial Revolution and the lead-up to the Great Depression. Theatres may also choose this play because of the 100th anniversary of the roaring 20s. That being said, I believe "Murder in Manhattan" could be considered evergreen content because audiences are always interested in a good murder mystery. Despite being a murder mystery, the play is funny (without being cringey), and ultimately the "bees knees" for the audiences!

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CAST OF CHARACTERS
(6 m, 10 w, 3 flexible, 2 extras)

CHARLIE DOLAN: A detective.
SCARLETT STRINGFELLOW: Novelist.
DELPHINE STRINGFELLOW: Scarlett's sister.
JASMINE STRINGFELLOW: Their mother.
JASPER BANKS: Scarlett's fiancé.
ERNEST "DUKE" BANKS: Jasper's brother.
CLAYTON BANKS: Their father.
LOUISE BONTEMPS: Ernest's girlfriend.
MINNIE WELLS: A lawyer.
GERTRUDE BLAKE: A reporter.
BENNY: The bartender.
ALICE: The maid.
FRANK EDWARDS: Scarlett's publisher.
BESSIE EDWARDS: Frank's wife.
MABEL SAGE: An accountant.
ETHEL MILLER: Delphine's friend.
HERBERT/HENRIETTA: The trumpeter.
CLIFFORD/CLARA: The bassist.
ROSALIE/RUSSELL: The percussionist.
DETECTIVE ROSCOE: Option for a cameo role.
ASSISTANT: Option for a cameo role.
EXTRAS: Coroners.

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ACT I

(AT RISE: The curtain opens to a stylish 1920s apartment in Manhattan with a party in full swing. The apartment features a living area with couches and plants, a giant window that leads to a terrace, and a large bar. MUSICIANS play lively jazz, BENNY and ALICE pass drinks off of platters, and people dance and talk. When the song ends, FRANK gets everyone's attention and addresses the GUESTS.)

FRANK: Gather round, gather round.

(GUESTS continue to talk.)

FRANK: *(Cont'd. Shouts.)* Quiet!

(GUESTS stop talking, MUSIC stops.)

FRANK: *(Cont'd.)* For those of you who don't know me, I'm Frank Edwards, *Senior* Editor at Random House. We're all here this evening to celebrate Miss Scarlett Stringfellow. Scarlett graciously offered to host this party in her home—now that I'm here, I'm beginning to think we're paying you too much, as your apartment is much bigger than mine.

BESSIE: Frank!

FRANK: What, Bessie? It's true. Anyway, let's give a warm welcome to our hostess, whose third novel comes out this week and is bound to be another *New York Times* bestseller: Miss Scarlett Stringfellow.

(GUESTS cheer. FRANK steps toward the bar, near BESSIE. SCARLETT steps DS.)

SCARLETT: Thank you, Mr. Edwards, for that introduction. I would just like to say a few words before the party gets too wild.

BENNY: I know that's right.

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SCARLETT: In due time, Benny! Now, I know most of you, but again, as Frank said, I'm Scarlett Stringfellow, your host for the evening. Welcome to my home— (*SCARLETT puts her arm around JASPER.*) *our* home in a few short months—and I'm so thankful that you could be here to celebrate the release of my third novel.

(GUESTS clap and cheer.)

SCARLETT: *(Cont'd.)* But that's not the only thing we should celebrate! My sister, Delphine—Delphine come over here. (*DELPHINE moves toward SCARLETT.*) has been starring as Mabel in "Pirates of Penzance" on Broadway since the show opened in December—to rave reviews, no less.

(GUESTS clap and cheer again.)

MABEL: That's so funny, Mabel's my name too!

SCARLETT: Nice to meet you, Mabel. Welcome to our party!

DELPHINE: We have to clap for Ethel too! She's been doing an amazing job as Ruth in *Pirates of Penzance*.

(ETHEL bows. GUESTS clap.)

SCARLETT: And, in even more unbelievably good news, my dear friend Minnie Wells—the best lawyer in Manhattan—has told me she is about to argue the Amorelli case in front of the Supreme Court. It's shaping up to be the most important court case of 1927. She's the cat's meow.

MINNIE: Scarlett, don't put me on the spot like this.

ROSALIE: The Amorelli case... Isn't that the case where the tenants are suing the building owner over their horrible living conditions?

FRANK: Oh, I heard about that. The building isn't up to code at all—no bathrooms, no ventilation, rats everywhere—and the building owner refuses to fix it.

MINNIE: That's the one! We go to trial in three months.

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(GUESTS clap and cheer again.)

MABEL: Wait, wait, before we applaud her, we should find out who she's representing?

ETHEL: That's a good point. Who are you representing, Miss Wells?

MINNIE: The tenants, of course! We can't let people with money get away with taking advantage of people with less power. *(Looks at CLAYTON.)* As my father taught me, we can't be afraid to stand up to bullies.

(GUESTS clap and cheer again.)

GERTRUDE: How do you spell Amorelli? I want to make sure the spelling's proper for my article.

ALICE: A-M-O-R-E-L-L-I.

GERTRUDE: Thank you.

SCARLETT: And Gertrude is here writing an article for the social column of *The New York Times*.

GERTRUDE: I'm sure I'm one story away from becoming a features writer.

SCARLETT: I know it, Gertie. As I said, lots of good news. We'll have some fun and surprises later in the night, but for now just—

JASPER: *(Interrupting SCARLETT.)* Honey, you're forgetting the most important thing!

SCARLETT: What?

JASPER: We're getting married!

SCARLETT: Oh my gosh, how could I forget? Yes, in two short months, we'll all be back here to celebrate our wedding.

HERBERT: Even us, Scarlett?

SCARLETT: Well, of course. It's not a party without the best jazz band north of New Orleans.

(HERBERT blows on his trumpet in a playful way.)

SCARLETT: *(Cont'd.)* But enough talk—let's have some fun!

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(The MUSICIANS start playing. JASPER takes SCARLETT's hand and they start dancing. Other GUESTS dance too or hang out by the bar. GERTRUDE has silent conversations with guests for her article. JASMINE approaches CLAYTON, who stands off to the side SL.)

JASMINE: Good evening, Mr. Banks.

CLAYTON: Good evening.

JASMINE: I suppose we should become more sociable now that your son and my daughter are to be married.

CLAYTON: Why?

JASMINE: Because it's the polite thing to do, and family is important. Politeness and family are bedrocks of our society.

CLAYTON: I have never found that politeness gets you anything worthwhile, and as for family, all it seems to be is a disappointment.

JASMINE: A disappointment?

CLAYTON: You heard me. They're a disappointment, who do nothing but leech off of your hard-earned money.

JASMINE: You cannot possibly be talking about your sons that way.

CLAYTON: I can, and I am. Neither one of them has been a success. First, Jasper insults me by choosing *not* to follow in my footsteps in business, and then Ernest over there—who insists on going by that ridiculous nickname, “Duke”—insults me even greater by joining my firm and then losing over a million dollars for our clients. The only good thing either of them seems to do for me is to bring me into proximity with attractive young women, like that one over there. *(Points to DELPHINE.)*

JASMINE: Mr. Banks, that is my younger daughter, Delphine, who is not only 20 to your 50, but is indeed the sister of the woman your son is about to marry...

CLAYTON: I'm aware.

JASMINE: But you can't do that! It's wrong.

CLAYTON: I'll do whatever I want because that's what money gets you.

JASMINE: She'll never glance at you, not with your morals.

CLAYTON: She won't have a choice. In case you haven't heard, as of last week, *I'm* the largest investor in the current run of "Pirates of Penzance"—you know, that show your daughter's in—and the producers now do whatever I tell them to.

(JASMINE starts to argue, CLAYTON cuts her off.)

CLAYTON: *(Cont'd.)* As for your other daughter, she's got a screw loose. She's marrying Jasper, who makes no money in rock collecting or whatever he does. And why she chooses to keep company with a dog like that lawyer Minnie Wells, *(Gestures at MINNIE.)* I'll never understand.

JASMINE: What is wrong with you?

CLAYTON: With me? Absolutely nothing.

(CLAYTON walks over to the bar and starts speaking with BENNY. During the next bit of dialogue, Benny and Clayton will talk for a while and eventually disappear SL for a few minutes and then return. Simultaneously, JASMINE goes to DELPHINE and whispers in her ear. Delphine reacts with concern. They continue talking quietly. The SONG ends; GUESTS change partners; SCARLETT goes to greet guests and JASPER dances with MINNIE. LOUISE sees Scarlett is free, she leaves ERNEST and goes over to her. Ernest goes to the bar and makes himself a drink and spends the next bit of dialogue watching Jasper.)

LOUISE: Miss Stringfellow, I just wanted to introduce myself to you...

SCARLETT: You must be Louise, Duke's new girlfriend. That's a lovely dress you've got on.

(SCARLETT loops arms with LOUISE and brings her DS.)

LOUISE: *(Taken aback.)* Why thank you. And... you know who I am?

SCARLETT: Well, of course! Duke has been talking nonstop about his beautiful Southern belle, all the way from...

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LOUISE: Savannah, Miss Stringfellow.

SCARLETT: Savannah, how lovely! And please, call me Scarlett.

(BENNY and CLAYTON re-enter SL.)

LOUISE: All right, Scarlett, I will! And thank you for inviting me to your party this evening. I brought my friend Mabel too. I've never been in an apartment with two floors before. I didn't think they made houses this big in New York!

SCARLETT: We're very lucky—

LOUISE: *(Cutting her off.)* And not a candle in sight—you must have electricity. How exciting! Duke's got electricity in his house, but my dormitory doesn't yet.

SCARLETT: The building was electrified a little over a year ago. I'm still not sure how it all works, but I learned enough to make repairs if something goes wrong. Jasper, Duke, Benny, and my sister know too—my mom refused to learn. I don't think she trusts it.

LOUISE: Wow—two floors, electricity, splendid parties... Is this the kind of life one gets when marrying a Banks brother?

SCARLETT: *(Taken aback.)* Maybe? But I bought the apartment, thanks to my writing career.

LOUISE: Really? Doesn't Jasper's finance career pay for everything?

SCARLETT: He's not in finance. He's a professor of geology.

LOUISE: Is that the study of... maps?

SCARLETT: It's the study of rocks. *(LOUISE makes a face.)* I know... but he loves them. It doesn't have to be fancy jewels either. He's happy to take me to Central Park and tell me how all the different rocks were made millions of years ago.

LOUISE: And what did he tell you about that?

(SHE points to SCARLETT's emerald necklace.)

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SCARLETT: Oh, you mean my necklace? Isn't it beautiful? Jasper proposed with it instead of an engagement ring. He told me that emeralds are even rarer and more precious than diamonds.

LOUISE: And he can afford that on a professor's salary?

SCARLETT: Uh...

LOUISE: Or was it from his family money?

SCARLETT: I think it came from the last of his family money, but we haven't really discussed it.

LOUISE: The last of his family's money? And that's it? No more Banks money?

SCARLETT: I guess—until his father passes, I suppose. But let's not talk about such things. Have you met Gertrude Blake? She's one of my best friends and great fun at parties. *(Gets GERTRUDE's attention.)* Gertie, come meet Louise, Duke's new girlfriend.

(GERTRUDE introduces herself to LOUISE and they start talking. SCARLETT slips away, grimacing at Gertrude in reference to Louise's behavior before she goes to talk to ALICE. JASPER makes eye contact with ERNEST, who is by himself at the bar, and walks over to him.)

JASPER: It seems like you've been avoiding me all night.

ERNEST: I haven't. *(Drinks from his glass.)*

JASPER: How's work going?

ERNEST: What's it to you?

JASPER: I know things haven't always been easy between us, but I do generally care about you. So, let me ask again, how's work going?

ERNEST: It's going just fine.

JASPER: I only ask because our father implied earlier this evening that wasn't really the case.

ERNEST: It's all good.

JASPER: And because a friend of mine saw you dressed in a suit reading *The Age of Innocence* at the library during the workday last week.

ERNEST: Oh yeah? And what were *they* doing there?

End of Freeview

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