

NIGHT CHILLS

Tales of Mystery and Terror

by Edgar Allan Poe

Adapted by Billy St. John

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Flexible Story Selection And Casting

By Billy St. John

When I set out to combine several Edgar Allan Poe stories into a full evening's entertainment, I decided to do so in a manner that gives whoever directs the show the most flexibility possible. To achieve this goal, I first designed an all-purpose set that could serve for the five plays in the collection, thus requiring little or no set changes between plays.

Although there are five stories in "Night Chills", you will probably decide to perform only three or four of them; they would provide you with a 90 minute or two hour show. All five are included to allow you to select which ones would best suit your needs, such as in regard to casting; this way you can use a large number of actors in the show, or you can have a small company appear in more than one play. For further flexibility, the sequence of these plays can be rearranged. This could allow the actors in one play to change costumes before appearing in another if they are cast in more than one.

One character - Edgar Allan Poe - narrates the plays and ties them together. His remarks that introduce each story and concludes them can be moved with the plays themselves if you wish to change their order. You will cut his dialog that pertains to the plays you omit, naturally. Each selection of Poe's narratives is set apart from the others so that you can tell easily where to do your editing. I wish you much success with "Night Chills."

Setting

The basic setting is an old-fashioned looking room such as might have existed in the 1800s. It contains a door DSR, one USL, and one DSL - all open outward; their destinations will vary with each story. There is a window in the USC wall. A desk is DS of the window, facing into the room; a chair sits behind it. A sofa is RC, angled into the room. A table is LC, also angled into the room; a chair sits UPS of it and another is SR of it.

TELL-TALE HEART

1. Front door.
2. Bedroom.
3. Zolka's room.

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

1. The great front hall.
2. Kitchen and servants' quarters.
3. Bedrooms and parts of the house.

THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE

1. Corridor.
2. Bedrooms.
3. Kitchen.

THE PURLOINED LETTER

1. Corridor.
2. Dining room and connected areas.
3. Bedrooms and servants' quarters.

THE CASK OF AMONTILLADO - The exits are to unspecified parts of the house.

OPENING NARRATION

(AT RISE: The stage is dark. A clock chimes twelve. On the fourth chime, A MAN begins to speak; it is EDGAR ALLAN POE.)

POE: "Once upon a midnight, dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore..."

(A soft area LIGHT fades up on the desk as HE continues. Poe is seated at the desk, writing his poem with a pen which he occasionally dips into an ink well. He seems intent, driven.)

POE: *(Continues.)* "While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping as of someone gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door. " 'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber door - only this and nothing more."

(HE breathes a sigh as he lays down the pen, weary. He brings his other hand up to shade his eyes and massage his temples. After a beat, he lowers the hand and looks out at the audience.)

POE: *(To the audience.)* Some will say I am mad; others, just a dreamer. The truth, perhaps, lies somewhere in between.

(HE rises as the room LIGHTS comes up around him. They are kept fairly dim through Poe's narratives and through most of his stories in keeping with the mood of the evening. He comes DSC as he talks.)

POE: The noted writer Walt Whitman might have captured me best when he wrote: "In a dream I once had, I saw a vessel on the sea, at midnight, in a storm. On the deck was a slender, slight figure, a dim man, apparently enjoying the terror, the murk, and the disclosure of which he was the centre and the victim. That figure of my lurid dream might stand for Edgar Allan Poe, his spirit, his fortunes, and his poems - themselves all lurid dreams."

It was evident from the beginning that I was not to lead a tranquil life. I was born in 1809 to David and Elizabeth Poe, actors who traveled the theatrical circuit in the Carolinas and Virginia. When I was but two years old, my father deserted my mother who was pregnant at the time, and ill. Not long after giving birth to my sister Rosalie, Mother succumbed to the ravages of tuberculosis. I was later to marry my cousin, Virginia Clemm, who likewise suffered poor health. She brought a bitter-sweet happiness into my life for a scant eleven years before she, too, left me to journey into the great beyond. Is it any wonder dying women often make their way into my stories and poems? Madeline Usher ... Lenore ... Annabel Lee ... Ah, you did not come to hear the rambling thoughts of a weary man; it was my stories that drew you here, and it is my stories you shall be told.

INTRODUCTION TO "THE TELL-TALE HEART"

POE: Perhaps the best known of my tales involves murder, guilt and greed. I call it "The Tell-Tale Heart." Imagine, if you will, that you are in a decaying house on the edge of a small Eastern village. It is a rainy summer evening.

(The LIGHTS fade out. POE exits in the darkness.)

"THE TELL-TALE HEART"

JESS STARK: An itinerant hardware peddler, 20s.

LORNA STARK: His attractive, sensitive wife, 20s.

NATHAN ZOLKA: Their half-blind, half-deaf benefactor, 70s.

KRISTIN HOLUB: Elder niece of Nathan Zolka, 29.

METTI HOLUB: Kristin's sister, 26.

BRANNAMAN: The village constable, 52.

PLACE: The parlor of a decaying house on the edge of a small Eastern village.

TIME: A rainy summer evening, some years ago.

SETTING: The set represents the parlor of a gloomy, run-down residence. The basic set must be dressed down to reflect this. A dirty tablecloth can be put on the table LC; a tattered old blanket can cover the sofa RC. Pile old boxes in front of the desk USC to mask it. Overlay a set of ragged curtains over the nice pair that hangs at the window USC. Strip the walls of any paintings or adornments that might be used in other stories.

PRODUCTION NOTE: The "heartbeats" in the final scene may be simulated on timpani (kettledrums) or on a bass drum. This effect might be "live" or tape-recorded, the latter possibly more satisfactory.

THE TELL-TALE HEART

(AT RISE: The stage is devoid of humanity. Blackness beyond window USC is disturbed intermittently by LIGHTNING. There is the sound of RAIN, continuing through play. A pause. Then JESS, a thin, strangely-behaving young man in wet jacket, enters at arch DSR, a lantern in his hand. He moves UPS furtively to the doorway USL.)

JESS: *(In a low, intense voice.)* Lorna! Lorna!! *(Halts suddenly; looks with caution toward door DSL, crosses DS and very carefully opens door, peering into the darkness beyond.)*

LORNA: *(Enters USL, with candle in her hand.)* Jess?

JESS: *(Closing door DSL carefully indeed.)* Shshsh!

LORNA: *(In lowered voice.)* I was preparing for bed.

JESS: *(Crossing to table, LCS.)* You'd best start preparing to leave.

End of Freeview

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