

Reading Between the Lies

By Kelly Barrett-Gibson

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STORY OF THE PLAY

“Reading Between the Lies” is a noir farce set in the world of 1940s Broadway. The first read of a new play becomes a crime scene when one of the participants unexpectedly drops dead. In a room filled with old vendettas, jilted lovers, blackmail victims and one loony former child star, it’s anyone’s guess who the killer is, who the intended victim was, and who, if anyone, will save the day! Hilarity and fast-paced whodunit antics ensue.

“The witticisms escalate into over-the-top wacky comedy. This is a highly satisfying, laugh-out-loud event.”

*- NY International Fringe Festival "Best Bet"
by Nancy Kelly at Theater is Easy.*

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

I could not have written this show without the help of my dramaturge, Wende O'Reilly. She read every page as I wrote them and provided invaluable feedback.

The show was produced by Endangered Artist Sanctuary in 2014 and directed by Schnele Wilson. The original cast is as follows:

Catherine Manderly: Teri Monahan
Horace Manderly: Jerry Chapa
Cort Birdie: Kurt Roediger
Joe Daniels: John Noto
Arthur Binkman: Andrew Rothkin
Jane White: Chelsea Clarke
Gwen Blanche: Kelly Barret-Gibson
Alice Hayes: Anna Wallace-Deering
Betty Blue: Wende O'Reilly
Cross: Carl Gibson

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

(4 to 5 M, 5 W)

CATHERINE MANDERLY: Married well above her station and fights unsuccessfully every moment to keep people from seeing this.

HORACE MANDERLY: Her husband and the producer.

CORT BIRDIE: A handsome, calculating young actor.

JOE DANIELS: The director. steps in through the open front door. He is an intense looking man.

ARTHUR BINKMAN: A playwright. An anxious-looking man in his late thirties – early 40s.

JANE WHITE: A wholesome looking young woman of 21.

GWEN BLANCHE: She is a fading Broadway star, past her ingénue years yet still clinging to them. She is a fragile force of nature.

ALICE HAYES: A young nurse.

BETTY BLUE: A former child star. Around 40 but dressed much younger.

***CROSS:** Detective. (Cort can be double cast as Cross if needed. Simply add a “corpse” during intermission.)

SET

The play takes place in the very posh living room of the Manderly home on the upper east side of Manhattan in the 1940s. A large bar is set up upstage, complete with champagne and cocktails. On a writing desk SR is a pile of scripts. In one corner is a coat rack and umbrella stand. There is seating arranged for 10.

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COSTUMES / PROPS

CATHERINE: Mirabeau-trimmed robe and heeled slippers and then, over dressed and dripping in jewels.

HORACE: Impeccably dressed in a suit, complete with ascot, cufflinks and tie pin.

CORT: A cheap tuxedo and stage makeup. He carries a compact.

JOE: Sloppily dressed with a day's worth of scruff. He has a flask and a whistle.

ARTHUR: Carries an umbrella.

JANE: Conservative outfit. She wears a large engagement ring.

GWEN: She has an expensive fur draped around her arms It has a bag of almonds in the pocket. She has a purse with candy.

ALICE: Her hair in a bun, glasses and a rather frumpy cardigan sweater. She carries small case that she carries with her. Inside are a large number of pill bottles of various sizes, lipstick, and in her pocket is a bottle labeled HCN.

BETTY: Her hair is styled in blond ringlets, and her pink and white dress looks like something a doll would wear.

CROSS: A trench coat and hat. He has a gun.

ACT I

(AT RISE: CATHERINE MANDERLY reclines on a sofa in a Mirabeau-trimmed robe and heeled slippers, empty martini glass close at hand. She is NOT dressed for company. Her husband, HORACE MANDERLY, can be heard calling from off stage.)

HORACE: Catherine! Catherine where are you!

CATHERINE: In here.

(Enter HORACE. He is impeccably dressed in a suit, complete with ascot, cufflinks and tie pin. He looks every inch "to the manner born.")

HORACE: Well, I hope you are proud of yourself.

CATHERINE: I'm always proud of myself, Horace. You should know that by now. Could you freshen up my drink? I've been ringing for the help, but they seem more than usually deaf tonight.

HORACE: That, my dear, is because they quit.

CATHERINE: Quit?

HORACE: Quit. *En masse*.

CATHERINE: Well, don't be silly. Have Jerome sort them out.

HORACE: I'm afraid that will be quite impossible.

CATHERINE: Horse feathers! He excels at riding herd over the ruffraff the agency sends over.

HORACE: Not this time.

CATHERINE: Why in heaven's name not?

HORACE: Because Jerome was the first one to tender his resignation.

CATHERINE: Now you really have lost your mind. Jerome would never leave us! He's like family!

HORACE: Perhaps you should have thought of that before you threw the ice bucket at his head.

CATHERINE: It was not him I tried to hit!

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HORACE: I know. Or at any rate assumed. You have atrocious aim. Had you been actually aiming for him he would not now be sporting robin's egg on his forehead and a completely drenched tuxedo. It was all I could do to keep him from pressing charges. I had to agree to a staggering severance, I will have you know. And once he resigned there was no way to keep the others from leaving. I will give you this, my dear Catherine. You don't go in for half measures. When you set out to be offensive you leave nothing out.

CATHERINE: It's not my fault you hire inferior staff. I always say, you get what you pay for.

HORACE: Oh, you always say that, do you? And what kind of servants did you have growing up in Scranton, may I ask?

CATHERINE: Now you are just being vulgar.

HORACE: Forgive me. I know how gently you were reared; I wouldn't want to offend your delicate sensibilities.

CATHERINE: You are forgiven. For now. Well, are you going to freshen my martini or not?

HORACE: That depends. Are you going to go put some clothes on? Our guests will be here any moment.

CATHERINE: I have told you already. They are your guests, not mine. If you want to entertain without consulting me, then you will forgive me if I do not jump to play hostess.

HORACE: Now enough! I explained to you, this is not about entertaining. This is about business. Arthur Binkman has written a new play. His first one in over 5 years. I have the option of first refusal, but I need to hear it read to find out if it's any good, or if his brains really have drained out of his ears.

CATHERINE: So read the damn thing and decide. You don't have to fill my home with nervous wrecks, out-patients, and harlots!

HORACE: Gwen Blanche is not a harlot!

CATHERINE: And yet you didn't need me to tell you who I meant. All this, not to mention whatever young drugstore cowboy you've found to be your latest amusement.

HORACE: I beg your pardon?

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CATHERINE: I don't know why you bother. You should know by now that I am not offended by your little peccadilloes. After all, how am I to compete when I completely lack the needed hardware?

HORACE: I don't know where you get your notions. Regardless, we are straying away from the point here! I need to hear the play aloud. I'm no good at imagining things in my head.

CATHERINE: I can read it for you! In fact, I think I am a much better choice for the role of Lana than the tart is anyway. She lacks the range.

HORACE: And yet she is the one with three Tonys and a contract from MGM!

CATHERINE: You beast! How could you!

HORACE: That was insensitive. Forgive me. You know I think you are everything beautiful. But you gave up the stage when we married. Mother insisted after all.

CATHERINE: Yes. I did, didn't I? Threw away all my hopes, my dreams, my ambitions. And for what? For you! I did it all because I love you!

HORACE: I'm sure the expense account didn't hurt things either. No, my darling. Forgive me. I was a beast. But please! Go get dressed! And tomorrow, I promise you we will go to Tiffany's, and you can pick out anything your heart desires.

CATHERINE: Anything?

HORACE: Anything. Within reason

CATHERINE: *(Cutting him off.)* Oh, Horace! You are simply the best husband ever!

HORACE: Does that mean you will get dressed? *(SFX: doorbell rings.)* Please, Catherine! I am counting on you! The servants have abandoned me, don't you leave me in my time of need!

CATHERINE: Never! I will go throw myself together and be back in two shakes!

(CATHERINE runs off. HORACE breaths a huge sigh of relief. SFX: the doorbell rings again. He crosses and opens it. At the door is CORT BIRDIE, in a cheap tuxedo and stage makeup.)

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HORACE: Oh, it's you.

CORT: Hello to you too. *(Pause.)* Well? Aren't you going to invite me in?

HORACE: If I must. *(Crosses to pour himself a drink.)* Good god, man, what are you wearing?

CORT: What do you mean?

HORACE: You look like the maître 'de of a supper club in Hoboken.

CORT: I'm wearing a tuxedo!

HORACE: My point exactly.

CORT: Since you're pouring, I'll have a tequila cocktail.

HORACE: No, you won't. I don't stock tequila. Nor do I have rotgut or potato vodka, before you ask.

CORT: Fine. Just give me one of whatever you're drinking.

HORACE: A Manhattan. Up.

CORT: Fine. *(Takes out a compact and touches up his stage makeup.)*

HORACE: I might have known you'd show up early.

CORT: Early? The invitation said nine o'clock sharp.

HORACE: Yes.

CORT: It's nine forty-seven!

HORACE: I fail to see your point. Do you see anyone else here yet? No. That's because they know how to properly comport themselves.

CORT: Go ahead, sneer at me. There's no one else here to see. But just remember our deal. *(Drinks his drink quickly.)*

HORACE: I am not likely to forget. Good lord, boy, you don't have to gulp it down like it's going out of stock! Sip. Slowly. You're as bad as my wife.

CORT: Yes, your dear, sweet wife. Where is she? I'm just dying to meet her.

HORACE: Catherine is getting dressed. She will be out shortly.

CORT: Maybe I will just have a little talk with her, since you seem to think we have so much in common.

HORACE: Now see here! I invited you, didn't I? You're to have a part in the reading here tonight. Do you know how many young actors would kill for that opportunity?

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CORT: I do, in fact.

HORACE: Well, just you remember then! I've kept my part of the bargain. Now you keep yours. Not a word to my wife or anyone else. That it has come to this. Blackmailed in my own home by a fourth-rate actor!

CORT: Whine about it all you like, insult me if you want. But just you remember who's calling the shots. (*Crosses and refills his drink.*)

(JOE DANIELS steps in through the open front door. He is a bit sloppily dressed with a day's worth of scruff.)

JOE: (*With sarcasm.*) Sorry I'm early. I assume no one else has arrived yet? (*To CORT.*) Nothing for me, thanks, but you can take my coat.

CORT: What would I want with that moth-eaten old thing?

HORACE: I'll take your coat, Joe. This isn't the butler. This is Cort Birdie.

CORT: I'm the lead actor in Arthur Binkman's new Broadway play.

JOE: Oh really?

HORACE: Assuming you approve, of course.

JOE: (*Dryly.*) Of course.

HORACE: Cort, this is Joe Daniels, the director.

CORT: Really?

JOE: Much to my ever-loving regret.

HORACE: Can I get you something to drink, Joe?

JOE: No thanks, Horace. You know me, I come prepared. (*Takes out a flask and takes a pull from it.*) Where's Kitty? Waiting to make an entrance I assume?

HORACE: You know women. Takes 'em forever to put their face on.

JOE: The one thing I know, Horace, is that no man really knows women. Complete mystery to all of us. So, you're playing Mike, are you? Interesting choice. Going with an unknown. Is the whole cast going that direction?

HORACE: No, just the one. You know it wouldn't be lucrative to have all the cast be nameless nobodies.

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JOE: Knew I couldn't be that lucky. *(Sits.)* So who else do you have lined up to torment me this go around?

HORACE: Well, there's Gwen of course.

JOE: You're joking!

HORACE: No...

JOE: Does Binky know about this?

HORACE: What do you mean? It wouldn't be an Arthur Binkman play without Gwen Blanche. I just assumed she would have the lead.

JOE: Are you trying to kill us all?

CORT: Why? Who's Gwen Blanche? And what's wrong with her?

JOE: What rock did you crawl out from under? Gwen Blanche is the biggest diva Broadway's ever seen.

HORACE: I wouldn't go that far...

JOE: She already drove Binky into a nervous breakdown once, you really want to go down that road again?

CORT: How? What did she do?

JOE: Her co-star, for one.

HORACE: Now Joe, no need to spread gossip. Gwen has starred in every show Binky has ever written. She's his muse.

JOE: When they were together, sure. But now that they're divorced? I doubt he'll thank you for this. But hey, all above my pay grade. Explains the boy though. Not exactly Gwen's type, is he? So, I guess we're safe there.

HORACE: Yes, my thoughts exactly.

JOE: Don't you think they'll look a little odd opposite each other on stage though?

HORACE: Now Joe, you know as well as I do that Gwen is ageless on stage.

(CATHERINE enters. She is quite overdressed and dripping in jewels.)

CATHERINE: Yes, isn't it a wonder what makeup and lighting can do. Good evening, Joe, you're looking handsome as ever.

JOE: Catherine. You're looking smart tonight.

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CATHERINE: I'm smart every night. Oh good, you got some of the waitstaff back. I'll have a martini, dirty.

CORT: I'm not the waitstaff!

JOE: Allow me.

CATHERINE: Always the gentleman. I don't know how you're still single, Joe.

JOE: When I set a goal, I stick to it.

CATHERINE: And so clever! You can't imagine how dull it's been around here since you went out to Hollywood. I'm ever so glad you've come back to us. Now, sit down right over here and tell me all about tinsel town!

HORACE: We were talking casting, Catherine.

CATHERINE: Oh pooh! I'd much rather hear about Joe's adventures out West. Tell me, did you have an affair with a starlet?

JOE: Happily, no. So, Horace, who else you got for me?

CATHERINE: You're not going to believe it.

JOE: Can't be worse than Gwen.

CATHERINE: My sentiments exactly. She's all wrong for the part!

JOE: Oh, I don't mean that. She'll be aces in the role. It's the off-stage fireworks I'm not looking forward to. Please tell me that you at least got someone stable for the sister. Marge Lindy maybe?

HORACE: No... we went in a different direction.

JOE: Eleanor Thrum?

HORACE: No, not Eleanor...

JOE: Well, out with it! Who did you saddle me with on this fiasco?

HORACE: Elizabeth Blue.

JOE: Who?

HORACE: Elizabeth Blue.

CATHERINE: You know her as Betty.

JOE: Broadway Baby Betty Blue??? You want to cast Broadway Baby Betty Blue? You cannot be serious!

CORT: Who?

HORACE: It will be her triumphant comeback.

JOE: Broadway Baby Betty Blue?

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HORACE: Her doctors say she's made a great improvement.
She's almost completely normal now.

JOE: I quit.

HORACE: Just think of the publicity.

JOE: That's it, I'm moving back to Montana.

HORACE: It will cause a media sensation.

JOE: My father's been after me for years to join his insurance firm.

HORACE: Think of it as a challenge.

CATHERINE: Oh, Joe, you can make anyone look good.

JOE: I could sell insurance.

CORT: What's wrong with her?

JOE: She's nuttier than a fruitcake!

HORACE: Betty is a little... shall we say... eccentric.

JOE: She's crazy as a loon!

CORT: Is she dangerous?

HORACE: Dangerous, no. Of course not. Harmless as a kitten.

JOE: And sometimes thinks that she is one!

CORT: What?

HORACE: Betty was a child star.

CATHERINE: About a million years ago.

HORACE: And she... well, let's just say that it stuck.

(SFX: The doorbell rings. HORACE opens it. Enter ARTHUR BINKMAN and JANE WHITE.)

HORACE: Saved by the bell! Arthur! Come in! So good to see you, old chap! You're looking splendid! Splendid! And who is this lovely young lady?

ARTHUR: Good evening, Horace.

CATHERINE: Binky, darling! It's been too long!

ARTHUR: Kitty, Joe.

JOE: Arthur.

ARTHUR: Allow me to present Miss Jane White. Jane, our hosts Horace and Kitty Manderly.

CATHERINE: Catherine. How do you do?

ARTHUR: And this gentleman over here is Joe Daniels, the best director in New York City.

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JOE: Pleasure.

JANE: *(Quietly.)* Nice to meet you all.

ARTHUR: Speak up, darling.

(CORT clears his throat.)

CATHERINE: Have you been back in town long?

ARTHUR: Just got in yesterday.

(CORT clears his throat again, louder.)

ARTHUR: *(Cont'd.)* I think the waiter is trying to get your attention, Horace.

CORT: I am not the waiter!

ARTHUR: I'm so sorry. Butler. Didn't mean to demote you!

HORACE: Binky, this is Cort Birdie. I brought him in to read the role of Mike for us.

ARTHUR: Oh. Hey, I'm sorry there, Cort. Tuxedo threw me off. Arthur Binkman, author. I know, Arthur, author... but what can I do?

CATHERINE: That's why we all call him Binky.

JANE: Binky?

ARTHUR: Just ignore that. Please.

CORT: Pleased to meet you.

ARTHUR: And this is Jane White.

JANE: Pleased to meet you.

HORACE: What a lovely ring that is.

JANE: Thank you. Arthur got it for me.

HORACE: I say, doesn't Gwen have one just like it?

ARTHUR: I couldn't say.

CORT: Are you in the theater too?

JANE: Who me? Oh no.

(CORT walks away from HER.)

HORACE: What do you do, Jane?

JANE: Oh, nothing yet. That is, I just finished college. But I hope to be a writer.

ARTHUR: Jane was in my intro to playwriting class.

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HORACE: Ah, another budding Broadway genius?

JANE: Not at all, I'm afraid. The course was horrible. Or, I mean, I was horrible at the class.

ARTHUR: Nonsense. She showed real promise.

JANE: Arthur is just being kind to me. I could never get the knack of coming up with such fantastic ideas out of the clear blue sky. My genre is non-fiction. I would have dropped out of the class, but Arthur was so handsome...

CATHERINE: Oh, how sweet.

JANE: I finally got the nerve up to stay after class one day and ask for help, and the rest is history.

ARTHUR: We were engaged a month later.

HORACE: Congratulations!

CATHERINE: Oh! Does Gwen know?

(Enter GWEN BLANCHE. She has an expensive fur draped around her arms, which she throws in CORT'S face as she enters. As she speaks ARTHUR'S eye begins to twitch. This is a nervous habit that recurs throughout the play whenever he is under stress and is relieved by eating a piece of candy.)

GWEN: Does Gwen know what? Careful with that, boy, it was a present from Clark Gable. Hello, Kitty. You're looking a little ruddy tonight. Fourth martini already? Horace! Well, aren't you just a fine figure of a man as always. Hello, Joe. Still swigging from that flask, eh? One day you'll tell me what's really in it! My guess is on warm milk laced with laudanum. How else could you stomach all of us, you poor man. And Arthur. Darling. Let's let bygones be bygones, why don't we? No need dwelling on the past. Oh dear, I see your eye is still going. Well, don't sit there twitching, darling, have a candy! *(SHE takes a bag of candy out of her purse and pops one in HIS mouth.)* Why on earth do you have an umbrella with you? The skies couldn't be more clear! I know, I know, "always prepared."

(GWEN takes ARTHUR'S umbrella from his hands and tosses across the stage to CORT.)

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ARTHUR: You're here.

GWEN: Now is that anyway to greet your wife?

ARTHUR: Ex-wife.

GWEN: If you say so, darling.

ARTHUR: Why. Are. You. Here?

GWEN: To read the part of Lana, of course. I was in Hollywood when Horace called, but I told them I absolutely must drop everything and come back East for this.

ARTHUR: Horace!

HORACE: Gwen! Allow me to introduce Miss Jane White.

JANE: Golly, you really are Gwen Blanche, aren't you! Arthur told me he knew you, but I didn't really believe him. I'm a huge fan.

GWEN: How sweet. Do you know, I have the oddest feeling I've seen you before... Now where would that be?

CATHERINE: In your worst nightmare.

GWEN: Do you work behind the jewelry counter at Bloomingdales? No, well, it will come to me. I never forget a face. Names I'm an absolute despair with, but faces I remember. I'll bet you're a Taurus, aren't you? You have a definite Taurus aura around you.

JANE: I don't really know.

GWEN: I assume Horace brought you in to play the sister? There is a certain similarity of type about us.

JANE: Oh no! I'm not an actress.

GWEN: No? But you have such a sweet face! The stage would love you! Well, if you aren't here to read, what are you doing here?

ARTHUR: She's with me.

GWEN: With you? You mean you finally took my advice and hired a gal Friday? At last!

CATHERINE: No, Jane is Binky's fiancée. Isn't that wonderful?

GWEN: Oh. Fiancée. Well. Isn't that lovely. Well. Congratulations to you both.

ARTHUR: Thank you.

GWEN: Well, I'll just have to get to know you better, won't I? After all, I can't allow my husband to marry just anybody!

ARTHUR: Ex-husband.

End of Freeview

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