

# THE TELL-TALE HEART

By L. Don Swartz

Excerpted from his full-length play, *Fright Night*

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## STORY OF THE PLAY

The familiar Edgar Allan Poe short story is updated here, set in the modern American judicial system. As part of a competency hearing to determine the suspect's mental ability to stand trial, the caged murderer faces a panel of legal and psychological experts as his confession is videotaped for all to see. As the experts probe deeper into the killer's psyche, the apparently motiveless murder starts to come into focus, and we discover the victim's "evil eye" was just the tip of the iceberg. One interior set.

*The Tell-Tale Heart was originally produced as part of the play FRIGHT NIGHT by the Ghostlight Theatre Company at the Grant Street Theatre in North Tonawanda, NY, on October 16, 1997. Fright Night is also available from Eldridge Publishing.*

"THE TELL-TALE HEART" was originally directed by Chris Fire. The cast in order of appearance was as follows:

OFFICER GRISWOLD	Carl Tamburlin
OFFICER GRAHAM	Michael Leszczynski
COUNSELOR VALDEMAR	Andras Brem
DR. TARR	Gelia Woodward
PROFESSOR FETHER	Julie Senko
PROSECUTOR BLOOD	JoAnn Mis
MR. BLACKWOOD	L. Don Swartz

## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*(4 m, 3 w)*

**OFFICER GRISWOLD:** (M) Intimidating physically.

**OFFICER GRAHAM:** (M) Good with a video camera.

**COUNSELOR VALDEMAR:** (M) Slick. Dramatic. Very good at what he does.

**DR. TARR:** (W) A sensitive psychologist. More interested in feeling over fact.

**PROFESSOR FETHER:** (W) A hard-boiled academic. Sticks with the facts. Skeptical.

**PROSECUTOR BLOOD:** (W) Intense. Direct. Sometimes fierce. A woman with a cause.

**MR. BLACKWOOD:** (M) A highly intelligent murderer. Not to be trusted.

**TIME:** The present.

**PLACE:** A basement conference room in the Municipal Courthouse, Boston.

## **SETTING**

A conference room in the basement of the City of Boston Municipal Courthouse. There is a long table SL with three chairs angled towards the audience. There is a sturdy metal cage, with a locking door SR. Seven-foot high by three-foot wide, it resembles the kind of structure one might find at the zoo to temporarily house a medium-sized animal. CS is a metal cart with a large television screen on it. The only door to the room is SL behind the table.

## **PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES**

**A note on the set:** We built the cage out of conduit pipe, (cheap and light) and placed it on a rolling platform. The cage was 3'x7' with a wooden floor and barred top. We spray painted the pipe silver. Table and cage must be set on extreme opposite sides of the playing area so that even the audience in the back row has to ping-pong their heads to follow the action, forcing them to drag their eyes across the stage every time someone else talks. As the interview becomes heated, this process makes the audience increasingly on edge.

**Use of television and camera:** It is important to place the screen directly center and directly at the audience. We were expecting glare from the stage lights, but there was none. The bigger the screen the better. It is important that Blackwood only look at the camera at the two spots indicated. The first time he looks directly at the audience as he is describing the murder we got an audible gasp from the audience every time. It gives the illusion that he is looking right at them. The actor playing Graham must be good with the camera. The dynamic use of the camera and screen provides constant movement to staging that could become static.

## THE TELL-TALE HEART

*(AT RISE: We hear a key in the lock of the door. The door opens and GRISWOLD and GRAHAM enter. Graham carries a video camera. Griswold crosses to the cage and tests the bars for strength.)*

GRISWOLD: This ought to hold him.

GRAHAM: It better hold him. Did you see the pictures of what he did?

GRISWOLD: I seen it.

*(COUNSELOR VALDEMAR enters.)*

VALDEMAR: *(Inspecting the cage.)* Perfect. Perfect. Go get the defendant. Graham, put that camera down and help him. Leave the handcuffs on him. Don't ever forget who you're dealing with.

GRISWOLD: No, sir.

VALDEMAR: I'll let the panel in. Don't bring Blackwood in here until I give you the signal.

GRISWOLD: Yes, sir. *(The GUARDS exit.)*

VALDEMAR: *(Sticking HIS head out the door.)* Dr. Tarr? Professor Fether? Prosecutor Blood? You may come in now.

*(DR. TARR peeks HER head in the door.)*

DR. TARR: *(Spying the cage.)* Oh, my goodness. *(SHE sits at the table and opens her notebook.)*

PROF. FETHER: *(Enters. SHE looks at the cage and sniffs.)* Counselor Valdemar, is this measure really necessary?

*(PROSECUTOR BLOOD enters. She slams her notebook on the table.)*

BLOOD: Counselor Valdemar, this time you've gone too far. Dr. Tarr, Professor Fether, I trust you'll overlook the good counselor's theatrics, and not let them influence your final

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BLOOD: *(Continued.)* decision. Counselor Valdemar, must I remind you that this is the final phase of a competency hearing for your client? The City of Boston's prosecutor's office is paying good money for our highly qualified experts, Dr. Tarr and Professor Fether. We don't have time to play these kinds of mind games.

VALDEMAR: Thank you, Ms. Blood, for the input. I shall take it in advisement. Dr. Tarr, Professor Fether, good to meet you. I'm familiar with your work and I trust that after witnessing my client's confession today, you will agree with the defense's panel of experts that Mr. Blackwood is mentally and emotionally deranged and unfit to stand trial for his crime.

PROF. FETHER: From what I've seen so far of the defendant's profile, this security measure does seem a bit extreme. You can be sure that I will make my final judgment based on the facts and the facts alone.

VALDEMAR: Very good, Professor Fether. Have you seen the photographs of the crime scene?

BLOOD: No, they have not. I didn't think it was necessary.

VALDEMAR: Of course you didn't think it was necessary, Prosecutor Blood. Why cloud the issue with the facts? Before I jump into the water, I usually like to know just how deep I'm getting in. Take a look at these. *(HE throws a file of photos on the table. They spill out. TARR and FETHER look through them.)* That's my personal favorite. You'll have to excuse the sheer number of photographs. I understand they were taken as the body parts were discovered. Think of it as a puzzle, if you will. With enough patience and a large roll of Scotch tape, you could probably reassemble a single photo of the victim.

BLOOD: That is enough, Counselor.

VALDEMAR: Is it? Dr. Tarr, Professor Fether, as you look at these photographs, do you want the man who did this sitting across the table from you? *(THEY both shake their heads.)* I thought not. That is why I took the liberty of requesting the cage. You need to be asking yourselves, is it really conceivable that a sane human being could do something like this.

## **End of Freeview**

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