

BLOT OUT

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of the Master of Arts in English

By
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ABSTRACT

BLOT OUT

Joseph A. Wheeler, M.A.

Western Carolina University (April 2024)

Director: Dr. Emily Huber

For my thesis, I wrote a play. This play follows a world-famous genius detective in a similar vein to characters such as Poirot or Sherlock Holmes, being forced to team up with a hard-boiled noir detective in the same vein as Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* or Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*. The story has the two of them being brought in to try and solve a murder case that has baffled the authorities. The plot sees the two of them butting heads, and eventually starting to reluctantly work together, but at a point in the play the two of them start to suspect that the other person may be somehow wrapped up in this murder case and things devolve from there. This play is a comedy-drama that has elements that you would expect in the sorts of stories that these archetypes are typically found in, but I tried to write fresh situations for these characters to interact in. This play is very tongue in cheek and relies on the audience's expectations of what these sorts of characters would do but I also find opportunities to playfully subvert those expectations. I aimed to find ways to commentate on the existence of “the detective solving a mystery story” by using the vast differences of tone that can be seen in these two archetypes, and by using several meta-narrative elements. Another element I heavily incorporate in this play is the use of projection to be able to have multiple locations, to sell the genres these characters

come from by incorporating pre-filmed scenes, and to visually convey some of these meta-narrative elements such as narrators that clearly indicate their respective genres.

INTRODUCTION

Blot Out is a comedy-drama that thrusts an eccentric genius detective and a hard-boiled noir detective into an unsolvable murder case. As they navigate the shadows of film noir atmospheres and unravel the intricate web of murder mystery tropes, the play becomes a dynamic exploration of their reluctant collaboration, laced with tongue-in-cheek humor, unexpected twists, and clever subversions of genre expectations. In the exploration of dramatic narrative and the interplay between archetypal characters, my thesis project endeavors to craft a play that transcends conventional expectations within the detective genre.

The decision to craft the play Blot Out in this way stems from my appreciation for detective stories and the vast number of tropes that define the genre. The conventions of murder mysteries, with their enigmatic detectives, their labyrinthine-style investigations, and the suspenseful reveal of the culprit, are a longstanding source of inspiration. Simultaneously, my project draws from my admiration for film noir and its distinct set of tropes from the smoky atmosphere of shadowy alleyways, the pervasive use of chiaroscuro lighting to create a visually striking atmosphere, and featuring detectives that are often morally conflicted, navigating a world rife with corruption and deception.

The stark contrast in tone and execution between murder mysteries and film noir serves as the cornerstone of this endeavor. The former often embraces a cerebral and refined approach, while the latter revels in the gritty and atmospheric, resulting in a fascinating duality that I was eager to explore. Blot Out became an experimental canvas where these genres can collide and intertwine, offering a unique playground to explore their respective tropes.

The play incorporates several unique scenarios that provide opportunities for genre exploration and subversions. Some of these are, at one point the noir detective uses his interrogation techniques to threaten a suspect to get him to confess; and at another time the genius detective figures out what femme fatale is up to because she is being obviously suspicious. Through these moments of narrative fusion, Blot Out aims to unravel not only an unsolvable murder case but also the potential for innovation and unexpected humor that arises when these genres converge.

Blot Out invites its audience to see what can occur when these generic conventions collide in a compelling and thought-provoking narrative. Key to executing this in this project is the incorporation of dual narrators, and the strategic use of projection to facilitate multiple locations and genre-specific pre-filmed scenes. These pre-filmed segments are used for narrated scenes that help set the mood and setting of a scene. Some of these pre-filmed segments also include the live actors interacting with what is happening within them and the genre-specific narrators. There are moments towards the end of the play where the noir narrator is narrating what the genius detective is doing and vice versa, as the two detectives start to learn each other's methods.

METHODOLOGY

In adhering to the industry standard for play formatting, as outlined in *The Dramatist's Toolkit* by Jeffery Sweet, attention is devoted to ensuring a presentation that is not only artistically compelling but also seamlessly aligned with established conventions. The play adheres to industry norms in terms of spacing, with dialogue set at 1.5 inches from the left margin, giving optimal readability for actors and directors. Character names are capitalized, centered above their respective lines, and stage directions are italicized to distinguish them from spoken text. The formatting prioritizes clarity, with scene headings specifying location and time, ensuring a smooth transition between settings. Additionally, the play maintains a consistent font and font size, adhering to a standard 12-point Times New Roman, reinforcing readability and professional presentation. Furthermore, the structuring of acts and scenes aligns with established norms, streamlining the navigation of the narrative for both performers and production teams.

The format of the pre-filmed moments in the script for *Blot Out* is crafted to meet the expectations of the film and television industry. The screenplay sections utilize Courier, maintaining a font size of 12 points. Dialogue is centered on the page, character names written in capital letters above their corresponding lines, while scene headings include specifics such as INT. or EXT. for interior or exterior locations, followed by the location and time of day. Action descriptions are written in the present tense, giving vivid but concise images that propel the narrative forward. The screenplay incorporates industry-standard margins of one inch on all sides, contributing to a clean and visually appealing layout.

The commitment to these industry norms ensures a polished and professional script but also streamlines the communication of the story's vision to any future parties interested in bringing *Blot Out* to life on the stage.

In the realm of eccentric murder mystery detective stories, certain tropes and archetypes recurrently define the genre. The central figure, often an idiosyncratic detective, embodies an unparalleled brilliance in deduction, displaying an almost Sherlockian level of analytical prowess. This detective, typically an outsider to societal norms, operates within a world of intricately layered clues, cryptic symbols, and enigmatic suspects. Eccentric detectives often possess quirks or eccentricities that set them apart, be it an obsessive attention to detail, unconventional methods of investigation, or an unusual personal background. Their interactions with other characters and their ability to unravel complex mysteries contribute to the genre's signature blend of intellectual engagement and character-driven narrative.

In contrast, the tropes of a noir detective story introduce a different set of conventions that thrive on a darker, more atmospheric tone. The noir detective, often a disillusioned and world-weary figure, navigates the shadowy underbelly of society. Operating in a morally ambiguous landscape, the noir detective is characterized by a cynical worldview, frequently haunted by personal demons or a troubled past. The narrative unfolds in gritty urban settings, complete with dimly lit alleys, smoky backrooms, and the pervasive sense of moral decay. Femme fatales, treacherous alliances, and a pervasive sense of fatalism contribute to the noir detective story's brooding atmosphere. The protagonist, often an antihero, engages in morally ambiguous actions, reflecting the morally complex nature of the world they inhabit.

The scholarly foundation of *Blot Out* delves into a diverse array of classic murder mysteries and noir films strategically chosen to enrich the play's intertextuality and genre

manipulation. Each selection, whether literary or cinematic, is chosen to infuse the play with the essence of its genre, providing a foundation for the seamless interplay between murder mystery and film noir elements.

Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was studied as a lasting literary example of intricate detective work and atmospheric tension. The deductive prowess of Sherlock Holmes became a source of inspiration for the eccentric genius detective in this play, aligning with the play's focus on cerebral investigation. Agatha Christie's mystery writing that can be seen in works such as *Murder on the Orient Express*, was used as research for the murder mystery elements of this work. Christie's meticulous plotting and use of misdirection serve as a guide for constructing a narrative filled with intricate clues and unexpected twists. The eccentric genius detective's deductive prowess in *Blot Out* also finds inspiration in Christie's iconic Hercule Poirot, and other gentleman detectives who encapsulate the analytical brilliance that defines the murder mystery genre.

There are several sources of inspiration and influence I have researched to construct the noir aspect of this play. These are a few of the main ones. Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* features a gritty portrayal of a hard-boiled detective, and the morally ambiguous underworld serves as an example within the genre for the expected atmosphere, character dynamics, and in the visual and tonal richness characteristic of film noir. *Double Indemnity* gives visual and narrative cues for its portrayal of a femme fatale being a large inspiration for similar characters in *Blot Out*. Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* use of suspense and visual storytelling were a large influence on *Blot Out*'s narrative structure. Roman Polanski's exploration of corruption in *Chinatown* was an influence as the noir detective in *Blot Out* will also grapple with a complex web of deception.

Blot Out used several self-aware plays as sources of inspiration and research to construct its story. In Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* she introduces a meta-narrative layer with a play within a play, creating a sense of intrigue that Blot Out seeks to emulate. Ira Levin's *Deathtrap* serves as a model for the play's manipulation of genre conventions and subversions. In Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth*, Shaffer's awareness of the detective story's genre's conventions and how to portray them, informs the Blot Out's approach to narrative complexity and how it will be in some sense an exploration of theatricality. Tom Stoppard's audience engagement and cheeky parody of the detective genre in *The Real Inspector Hound* became a guiding influence as Blot Out incorporates moments where the detectives interact with the audience, inviting them into the unfolding mystery, inspired by Stoppard's approach to breaking the fourth wall. The meticulous planning found in murder mystery stories and the atmospheric moments found in noir cinema, combined with the narrative structures of self-aware plays, contribute to the layered storytelling that defines what I aimed to achieve with Blot Out.

BLOT OUT

A Play

By

Joseph Wheeler

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Dear Director,

Welcome to the production of *Blot Out*, a unique theatrical experience that blurs the lines between stage and screen. As you prepare to bring this play to life, I wanted to provide some insights and guidance to enhance your understanding of the vision behind the production.

Blot Out is not your typical play; it's a hybrid creation that seamlessly integrates live performance with pre-filmed segments. These pre-filmed segments are essential components of the narrative, meant to evoke the cinematic atmosphere of classic film noir and genre detective films while also providing a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the making of the play itself. Each of the segments are formatted in accordance with the industry norms, and this change in formatting throughout the play will indicate to you what segment you are in.

When incorporating the pre-filmed segments into the production, it's crucial to approach them with a cinematic sensibility. Think of these segments as mini-movies, complete with careful attention to lighting, framing, and editing. We want the audience to feel immersed in the world of film noir, with all its shadows, intrigue, and visual richness as well as the eccentricities and mystic of the world of a genius gentleman detective.

Additionally, *Blot Out* includes documentary-style segments that serve as interviews conducted 30 years after the events of the play. These segments offer retrospective insights into the characters, themes, and production process from older and sometimes wiser versions of the play's characters. As you integrate these segments into the performance, strive to capture the authenticity and intimacy of documentary filmmaking.

Throughout the production, embrace the interplay between live performance and pre-filmed elements. Use projection technology to seamlessly transition between the stage and the

screen, creating a fluid and immersive experience for the audience. By blending these mediums, we can transport viewers into the world of *Blot Out* and immerse them in its narrative.

Above all, remember that *Blot Out* is a play about storytelling. It's about the art of detective fiction, the allure of film noir, and the magic of theater itself. As you direct this production, embrace the creative possibilities of this hybrid format, and invite audiences on a thrilling journey that blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction.

Thank you for your dedication in bringing *Blot Out* to life. I look forward to seeing your vision unfold on stage.

Best regards,

Joseph Wheeler

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JACK/MAXWELL.....A man in his early forties.
EMILIANO/REGINALD.....A man in his late forties.
MR. THOMPSON/FRANKA man in his early thirties.
ROSY/ACTOR 3..... A woman in her thirties.
NAILS/WRITER/ACTOR 1..... A man in his thirties.
CAPTAIN JONES/JIM PARKER/ACTOR 2.....A man in his late fifties.
BUTLER/NARRATORS/NEWS PRESENTER.....A man in their late forties.
ASSISTANT/ASSISTANT DIRECTOR.....A man or woman of any age.
MRS. FRANK/WAITER/BARTENDER.....A woman of any age.

TIME

The late 1940's.

ACT I
SCENE I

Setting: Unknown Location. Time Unknown. Centerstage is a wooden desk, with a typewriter sitting on it, surrounded by scattered papers.

At rise: WRITER is on a small wooden stool CS. WRITER is surrounded in a cloud of smoke, has a cigarette drooping out of his mouth, and is furiously and violently typing on a typewriter. The faint sounds of an argument between JACK and OFF STAGE VOICE are heard from BSR. WRITER looks in the direction of the arguing, shakes his head, turns back to the typewriter, wipes the sweat that has collected on his forehead, and writes even faster than before. WRITER slams the carriage, rips the paper from it, and glances at it for a few seconds.

WRITER

It'll do.

(WRITER grabs the stack of papers next to the typewriter, clutches them to his chest and runs OSR. There is a moment of silence)

OFF STAGE VOICE

This is crap!

WRITER

I tried!

OFF STAGE VOICE

I can't use any of this!

(There is a moment of silence)

OFF STAGE VOICE

Ok.

(There is another pause)

OFF STAGE VOICE

Make the call.

WRITER

Yes sir.

BLACK OUT

NOIR NARRATOR

(Offstage)

Crime.

(A projector whirls to life, showing a black-and-white film)

EXT. DARK STREET – EVENING

A man in a fedora walks up to another man reading a newspaper.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

It's anywhere and everywhere.

The man in the fedora punches the man reading the newspaper in the face. The man with the fedora laughs heartily.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

And it can come from anyone.

The man who was punched stands up, pulls out a gun, and shoots his assailant. The man falls to the ground dead. The man with the gun looks at the camera and laughs. The camera tracks out.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

Can it even be stopped? Is the world just too despicable and cruel?

The man with the gun continues to laugh harder.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

Enter Private Eye Jack Hatchett.

A man across the street pulls out a gun and shoots the laughing man. The camera whirls around him revealing him to be detective JACK HATCHETT.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

No lead he can't follow, no secret he can't extract. He's seen what lies in the hearts of wicked men and he's responded in kind.

Jack stares at the dead man and re-holsters his gun.

JACK HATCHETT

See you in the funny papers.

Jack lights a cigarette and walks down the street, away from the dead body down toward a dark alley.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

He prowls the streets, protecting the innocent.

A man is pulling at a WOMAN's purse. The woman is shrieking loudly. The man yanks the purse away from the woman. JACK appears from the darkness, pulls out his gun, and shoots the man. The man falls over dead, still holding the purse. The woman immediately smiles at JACK and without breaking eye contact leans down and yanks her purse back from the dead man. She clasps the purse to her chest and excitedly runs up to Jack. She puts her hand on his chest.

WOMAN

Jack, are we in love?

Jack stares at the woman, grabs the barely used cigarette hanging from his mouth and tosses it on the ground. He reholsters his gun, pulls out another cigarette and lights it. He takes one big puff of the cigarette and looks up at the sky. Jack looks back down at the woman.

JACK

No.

Jack turns on his heel and walks back into the darkness. The woman reaches in the direction of Jack, one tear falls from her face.

WOMAN

I'll never forget you.

Jack walks down the alleyway.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

He's a lone wolf, one who can't be distracted. The city needs him, and he needs it.

Jack exits the alleyway and stares at the passing cars.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

But there's something coming, unlike anything he's ever faced.

Jack walks down the street against the direction the cars are going.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

Something even he's not sure he can stop.

FADE TO BLACK

INT. EMILIANO OFFICE – MORNING

FADE IN

EMILIANO DE LEON sits at an ornate desk surrounded by a vast amount of maps, paintings, and sketches that cover the walls.

GENIUS NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

Brilliance is not something that can be taught.

ASSISTANT runs into the office. Emiliano is sipping at a cup of tea putting the finishing puzzle pieces of an enormous puzzle that is one large question mark on a white background. He gets a call on his phone and lifts the phone up to his ear.

EMILIANO

I see.

Emiliano nods and writes something on a piece of paper next to him.

EMILIANO

But of course.

Emiliano hangs up the phone. He looks up at the ASSISTANT. Emiliano clicks his tongue and shakes his head.

EMILIANO

I am so sorry my friend.

ASSISTANT

What for?

Emiliano stands up.

EMILIANO

Your wife is cheating on you I'm afraid.

ASSISTANT

No she's not!

GENIUS NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

It's a burden, and a heavy one to carry.

Emiliano nods his head and takes the cup of tea that ASSISTANT was holding. Emiliano walks out of the office, with the ASSISTANT following close behind him.

EMILIANO

Not only is she cheating on you, her lover is your brother.

Emiliano and ASSISTANT walk down a long hallway with it's walls lined with several framed newspapers all with headlines like "Impossible Case Solved".

ASSISTANT

How would you even know that?

Emiliano laughs softly, takes a sip of his tea, and glances at ASSISTANT.

EMILIANO

Isn't it obvious.

ASSISTANT

No! Not really!

GENIUS NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

From the time he was a boy of six, Inspector Emiliano De Leon considered himself to be the most intelligent mind in the world.

Emiliano scoffs. He takes another sip from his tea. He chuckles again while drinking it. He gives the ASSISTANT his cup of tea and pushes open the large door and walks out into a lush garden. He begins quickly walking on a stone path with ASSISTANT behind him.

GENIUS NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

His wit, sharp as a tack. His cleverness, more cunning than a fox. His investigative prowess, unmatched by any man or beast.

Emiliano pushes open the garden's small wooden gate, and walks out into a bustling street. He slows down, lets ASSISTANT catch up and stand beside him, and begins walking down the street.

EMILIANO

Your wedding ring is on tight which means you have been married for at least a few years, but what I noticed before is that while it appears to be gold it is actually brass. You pretended to be a man of wealth when you wooed her. But you did not account for her fine tastes being as fine as they were.

Emiliano nods at a group of women as they pass by them.

EMILIANO (CONT'D)

So, you have taken up several jobs to support her, hence the late nights, hence the bags under your eyes. You have a bit of dirt under your right thumb which indicates to me that this other job is in landscaping. You're wearing quite a nice tie, too nice, it wasn't bought by yourself. A gift. But a practical one, one from someone who knows you and knows that you wish to not let people know of your finances. Only a family member or trusted friend could know such things and you have no time for friends.

Emiliano rounds a corner and begins walking down a street where several luxury cars are parked.

EMILIANO

Your wife knows little about you even still, and that is why your white shirt, which also was a gift, is a size too large. She thinks little of you and would not ask what you wanted even if it would kill her. But you still work, still work hard. Why? Because you know just how good things can be. Your cuff links are silver and have your families initials on them? Why? Because they have been a family tradition, passing down ornate cufflinks. Your family is quite wealthy but they haven't given you a dime of that income. Who do they give it to? Your younger brother who manages

to do anything and everything that is possible better than you. They gave him everything.

Emiliano approaches a police officer putting a ticket on one of the cars that is double parked. He raises his hand, the police officer looks over, and Emiliano gives the police officer the paper he wrote on.

EMILIANO

Good morning. This paper contains the name of the man who attempted to steal that Claudio Coello piece. I suspect he will be in his chateau south of Oviedo.

The police officer looks at the paper, looks up at Emiliano, and back at the paper. Emiliano spins on his heels and starts to quickly go back the way he came. The police officer behind him pulls out his radio and starts to talk into it. Emiliano looks over at the ASSISTANT as he talks.

EMILIANO

And so, how to do unravel this web of dedication and trying to show your mettle? Your last detail, your shoes. You thought they were yours, they even look like they would fit you. But they do not, and they are the most expensive item you are wearing in your entire ensemble. Which begs the question, where would you get them? You obviously don't know these are as expensive as they are as you got them polished this morning with an incorrect polish for this type of Italian shoe. How then do we get these shoes on your feet? Simple. Those are your brother's shoes.

Emiliano pushes back open his garden gate and walks back on the stone path.

EMILIANO

Your wife has not been impressed by your income provided by your multitude of jobs and has seen fit to make other arrangements. He has come around many times as of late, no?

Emiliano opens the wooden door, takes his tea back from ASSISTANT, and walks back down the newspaper lined hallway.

EMILIANO

Enough that he hasn't even realized he has left his shoes at your place or doesn't care. He spent the night with your wife, and in the morning, in a rush,

grabbed your cheap shoes, leaving his own expensive pair in their place.

Emiliano pushes open his office door and takes a sip of his tea with his free hand.

ASSISTANT

Oh.

GENIUS NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

He is and continues to be the best detective, and quite possibly the best person to walk the face of the earth. Living or dead.

Emiliano grins, leans against his desk, finishes the last of his tea.

EMILIANO

My mind dazzles myself.

ASSISTANT

I...

The ASSISTANT scratches his head, Emiliano hands him his empty cup.

EMILIANO

Yes? Spit it out!

ASSISTANT

I, uh. Wow.

EMILIANO

Yes, yes it is very sad. But what is it that you have come here to tell me? I am dying every moment you waste pattering about.

ASSISTANT

I uh just came to tell you that you have been invited to help someone who is hosting an elaborate ball with a uh series of eccentric guests who have a lot of secrets.

Emiliano smiles, walks back behind his desk, and sits down.

EMILIANO

Ahhhh. And there will of course be a murder. I have so missed the chase, for I am a ravenous lion.

ASSISTANT

Ok...

The ASSISTANT stares off into the distance. Emiliano looks down at his puzzle, and puts the last piece in, finishing it.

EMILIANO

Divorce your wife.

Emiliano pulls a book off his desk titled "Brilliant" with his face on the cover, starts to read it, and waves his free hand. The ASSISTANT starts to leave the room in a hurry, but then whirls around.

ASSISTANT

Wait! What if you're wrong?

Emiliano does not look up, keeps reading and lets out a loud and brief laugh as he turns the page.

EMILIANO

I am never wrong!

FADE TO BLACK

ACT I
SCENE III

Setting: Mansion Lobby. Afternoon. Centerstage are two leather chairs.

At rise: MR. THOMPSON is sitting in a chair next to JACK who is standing DSL. JACK is smoking and staring at MR. THOMPSON is holding a cup of coffee.

MR. THOMPSON

Look, you know how much I appreciate the work you do.

(JACK blows a puff of smoke at MR. THOMPSON)

MR. THOMPSON

If it was just another gangster, I wouldn't hesitate to have you head this up. I just need answers, and he's the sort of guy who can give them.

(MR. THOMPSON takes a sip of his coffee mug, glances up and sees JACK slowly walking up to him, and looks back down at his

coffee. MR. THOMPSON slightly shakes head, and takes another sip, his hand shaking. JACK is now standing right in front of him)

JACK

Spill.

MR. THOMPSON

I like you, but I need this resolved quickly.

(JACK takes a drag on his cigarette and groans. MR. THOMPSON stands up. BUTLER bursts on stage from USR and walks toward MR. THOMPSON. He stares at JACK and then looks over at MR. THOMPSON)

BUTLER

He's here sir.

(MR. THOMPSON nods and motions his hand)

MR. THOMPSON

Bring him in.

(BUTLER exits USR. JACK and MR. THOMPSON turn to the right. Several reporters with microphones loudly asking questions at the same time as they back into the room. They have surrounded EMILIANO. MALE REPORTER raises his hand. EMILIANO points to MALE REPORTER)

MALE REPORTER

Mr. De Leon, what's made you offer your services?

(EMILIANO smiles and glances over at JACK and MR. THOMPSON. EMILIANO spreads an arm in their direction)

EMILIANO

I relish an opportunity to educate and unravel any deception.

(JACK groans and rolls his eyes at EMILIANO. EMILIANO stares at JACK, and a faint smile come across his face. FEMALE REPORTER raises her hand. EMILIANO doesn't look break eye contact with JACK but waives his hand in the woman's direction)

EMILIANO

Yes darling?

FEMALE REPORTER

How much will you be compensating you for your time?

(EMILIANO gives a half-grin and turns to face her. He chuckles)

EMILIANO

More than most why don't we say that?

(FEMALE REPORTER nods and scribbles in her notebook. JACK walks up to the reporters)

JACK

No more questions. Beat it.

(The reporters exit USR. EMILIANO walks with JACK back over to MR. THOMPSON)

MR. THOMPSON

We appreciate you agreeing to help us out.

EMILIANO

I assure you, the pleasure is all mine.

(EMILIANO glances over at JACK)

EMILIANO

And who might you be?

(JACK looks at EMILIANO, throws his cigarette on the ground, twists it out, and pulls out another, lights it and takes a drag on it)

MR. THOMPSON

He's Jack.

(JACK blows out a puff of smoke)

JACK

Jack Hatchett. Private Eye.

EMILIANO

Why is Mr. Hatchett here with us today?

(EMILIANO nods over at MR. THOMPSON's coffee mug. He smiles at JACK)

EMILIANO

He bring you your coffee this morning?

MR. THOMPSON

Probably the best detective in the city. Been working it a long time. Get's things done. Helped my family out in quite a few scrapes. You'll be working this together.

(EMILIANO's smile disappears for a moment. He regains it)

EMILIANO

I assure you, I will not be needing any additional assistance.

MR. THOMPSON

Be that as it may, you don't know the way this city works, where things are, and how to get them. I'd prefer not to get killed too so I figure the two of you are going to close those odds for me.

(EMILIANO is no longer smiling, he looks at JACK who has a smirk, and then back to MR. THOMPSON)

EMILIANO

In my agreed upon terms, that you signed, I said that I would need no assistance, and not only that, but I explicitly stated that I would not help you if you wished to provide anyone else.

MR. THOMPSON

Yeah, well. That's the deal.

(EMILIANO looks over at JACK, clicks his tongue, looks back at MR. THOMPSON and nods)

EMILIANO

Understood.

(EMILIANO spins on his heel and begins to briskly walk away. JACK chuckles)

JACK

I get it.

(EMILIANO stops, and turns his head around)

JACK (cont'd)

Sure you're real great at findin' some dame's earrings and crackin' wise. This city'll chew you up, spit you out, and leave you for the rats to find.

(EMILIANO cracks a half smile. He walks back up to JACK and MR. THOMPSON)

EMILIANO

It just occurred to me how this would be a wonderful educational opportunity for you. I'd love to have you tag along.

MR. THOMPSON

Alright, great. Jack, take Emiliano over to your office and let him know what you know. Remember, you two are partners.

(EMILIANO and JACK both stare at each other and slowly nod. EMILIANO spins on his heel once more and begins to briskly walk towards USL. JACK watches him walk away, waits till he's almost off stage)

JACK

Beater's this way egghead.

(EMILIANO spins on his heel once more, and follows JACK to DSR)

BLACK OUT

(A phone is ringing. The sound of it being picked up is heard)

UNKNOWN VOICE 2

Yeah?

UNKNOWN VOICE

It's me.

UNKNOWN VOICE 2

What do you want?

UNKNOWN VOICE

Your client's rate is going to be adjusted.

UNKNOWN VOICE 2

You can't be serious.

UNKNOWN VOICE

There's been complications.

UNKNOWN VOICE 2

Don't care. We agreed upon an amount and you'll pay it.

UNKNOWN VOICE

Tell him that he's forced us to move in a different direction. Spin it however you'd like.

UNKNOWN VOICE 2

You begged him to do this. We'll walk away, we've got several gigs lined up.

UNKNOWN VOICE

Don't kid yourself.

UNKNOWN VOICE 2

Want to test that? Want to see what'll happen to you, and the rest of your pals?

UNKNOWN VOICE

The hell can he do?

(UNKNOWN VOICE 2 chuckles. There is a silence for a moment)

UNKNOWN VOICE (cont'd)

Alright. He's got 48 hours to turn this around.

UNKNOWN VOICE 2

He can do that.

UNKNOWN VOICE

He better. For all our sakes.

(The sound of a phone being placed back on the receiver is heard)

FADE IN

ACT I
SCENE IV

Setting: JACK'S OFFICE. Afternoon. Downstage is a wooden desk, with a coffee pot, cups, and several papers scattered around it.

At rise: JACK walks over to the desk from BSR, grabs a pitcher of coffee off the desk and pours two cups of coffee. He hands one to EMILIANO, who takes a sip and starts to gag.

EMILIANO

What is in this?

JACK

Coffee.

EMILIANO

It's dreadful. It tastes like you didn't even use water to brew it, just cheap whiskey.

(JACK nods and pulls out a cigarette)

JACK

Got tired of adding it later.

(EMILIANO sets down the coffee mug, and JACK lights his cigarette)

EMILIANO

So, what do you know about this case?

(JACK takes a sip from his mug and grimaces)

JACK

Thompson's got a lot of rackets.

EMILIANO

Legitimate and Illegitimate I presume.

(JACK shrugs, grabs a handful of papers off the desk and hands them to EMILIANO)

JACK

Yeah. Runs the Thompson Bootlegging Empire. But he's flush and doesn't kill nobody.

(EMILIANO nods and starts to scan the papers)

JACK (cont'd)

Lotta people like em. More don't. Spent a fortune buying up land for a distillery a while back. Lotta fellas spent a lot of money to get that place up and running. Can't think of one that's gotten their money back.

(EMILIANO strokes his beard)

EMILIANO

So, you warn people of those who don't like them?

(JACK chuckles)

JACK

Yeah. Somethin' like that.

(EMILIANO stares down at JACK's gun)

JACK

Thompson was planning on going to one of his meetings with some fellas he owed a fortune to. He ate some bad grub, and had to send his brother Frank as a bag man instead. Let him borrow his boiler.

EMILIANO

And Frank is dead now, yes?

(JACK nods)

JACK

Yeah. And we can't find the heap. He was found at the docks, pockets stuffed with an assortment of junk, includin' two diamonds. Cutter can't determine how he got bumped off.

EMILIANO

Curious.

(JACK shrugs, takes a cigarette out, lights it, and takes a long drag on it)

JACK

Yeah well, some say Frank had it comin'.

(JACK puffs out the smoke from the corner of his mouth. EMILIANO pulls out a sherlockian pipe, stuffs some tobacco in. He folds the papers JACK handed him and stuffs them in his jacket pocket)

JACK

Apparently, was cheatin' on his missus with some broad.

(EMILIANO nods and holds out his pipe, JACK stares at him for a moment and takes another drag on his cigarette. JACK pulls a match out of his pocket, and slashes the nail of his thumb against the end of the match. JACK hands the match of EMILIANO who lights the pipe. EMILIANO puts the pipe between his teeth and takes a few quick puffs on his pipe. EMILIANO takes the pipe out of his mouth)

EMILIANO

Were Mr. Thompson and his brother close?

(JACK shakes his head)

JACK

Not particularly. Thompson runs everything. Frank may have looked just like im but he was a bum and Thompson can't stand bums.

(EMILIANO nods, takes a few quick puffs of his pipe, and blows one long puff of smoke out)

EMILIANO

What else do we know?

JACK

That's it.

(EMILIANO points the pipe at JACK)

EMILIANO

Are you attempting to be funny?

JACK

No.

(EMILIANO shakes his head, sighs, and scratches his head)

EMILIANO

I should have expected. Please, show me the items you have procured for our investigation.

(JACK nods and beckons him over to a table. EMILIANO walks over. EMILIANO studies the objects. JACK lifts up a worn piece of paper)

JACK

Hard to tell after the water got to it, but I thought it looked like this used to be a letter.

(EMILIANO snatches the piece of paper from JACK. EMILIANO studies the paper)

EMILIANO

It's a poem.

(EMILIANO scans the poem)

EMILIANO

Interesting, the transcription seems to be inaccurate. There are several inconsistencies.

(JACK smokes and watches EMILIANO walks over to JACK'S desk, pulls a pen out and begins circling several words. JACK blows out a puff of smoke)

EMILIANO

It is clear to me that the victim was trying to leave us a clue. These mis-spelled words will be leading us on a wonderful chase that I suspect will result in us obtaining our prize.

(JACK cocks his head to the side)

JACK

Lemme see that.

(JACK snatches the page back. He looks at it and squints. He blows smoke out of his nostrils and points to a circled word)

JACK

What gives?

(EMILIANO chuckles)

EMILIANO

If you were aware of this beautiful poem, written by a turkish painter in the 17th century, to his second mistress that would later become his third wife, you would know that it should be saying it should say Broken here.

(JACK looks over at EMILIANO and smirks)

JACK

It does.

(EMILIANO shakes his head and points to the circled spot)

EMILIANO

It should say Broken, yes, but here it says Braken. Perhaps this is a sort of indication of his understanding of the eventual tragic nature of his death. Braken brings to mind the imagery of the Kraken, a terrifying sea creature whose stories were told around many a greek campfire back-

JACK

(Interrupting)

No, it says broken. Frank was a sap.

(JACK points at the page)

JACK (cont'd)

See there's the o in love. The whole poem's like that. Couldn't spell to save his life.

(JACK flicks out his cigarette and takes another sip of the coffee)

JACK (cont'd)

And it didn't.

(EMILIANO stares at the page for a moment, glances at JACK out of the corner of his eye, glances back to the page, sighs and hands it back to JACK)

EMILIANO

Be that as it may, I am not ruling it out of the question that our victim knew of his untimely demise-

JACK

(Interrupting)

Put a sock in it. You and I both know that story was screwy.

(EMILIANO smiles back at JACK)

EMILIANO

I am never wrong Mr. Hatchett. Only occasionally are my efforts misplaced.

JACK

Oh of course! Wouldn't want to misplace those.

(EMILIANO takes a few puffs of his pipe and smiles)

EMILIANO

No we wouldn't.

(JACK rolls his eyes and checks his watch)

JACK

We should start heading back to Thompson's joint. Like to follow up on a few leads now that the riff-raff should be there.

(EMILIANO lets out a slow puff from his pipe)

EMILIANO

Do you not find it strange that our employer has found himself hosting a party before the body of his relation has been lowered into his eternal nest?

(JACK stares at EMILIANO and lights another cigarette. JACK takes a drag on the cigarette)

JACK

I'm more interested in who turns up.

(JACK blows out a puff of smoke)

EMILIANO

So you believe the guests Mr. Thompson has invited for tonight's indulgences will be there for more nefarious purposes?

(JACK takes a drag on his cigarette)

JACK

Thompson's giving his brother a sendoff. Sent out the invite to close friends and family.

EMILIANO

So, we will be getting a front row seat into Frank's most inner circle. Who he trusted and broke his bread with.

(JACK blows out a puff of smoke)

JACK

Or who wants a free drink at Frank's expense.

EMILIANO

So you are curious as to who would show their face at such a tactless ordinance as this?

(JACK nods. EMILIANO strokes his mustache for a moment and smiles, looking at JACK.)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

It is fascinating to see how your deductions are calculated.

(EMILIANO gives a short laugh. JACK takes a drag on his cigarette, blows out a puff of smoke, and after staring at EMILIANO for a moment, tosses it aside. JACK begins to walk to DSR. EMILIANO starts to follow him, stops, looks around the office for a moment and lets out a small chuckle. JACK stops just before OS, turns back, and stares at EMILIANO. JACK sighs)

JACK

You comin'?

(EMILIANO flips his pipe upside down, knocks the tobacco out, and puts the pipe back in a small case. He gestures towards the door)

EMILIANO

Oh by all means. This should be fascinating.

(EMILIANO and JACK exit DSR)

FADE TO BLACK

ACT I
SCENE V

Setting: Mansion Living Room. Evening. Centerstage there is a small bar.

At rise: Several guests are littered across the stage talking and drinking. EMILIANO and JACK enter from BSR. MR. THOMPSON walks up to EMILIANO and JACK and looks over at EMILIANO.

MR. THOMPSON

Caught up to speed?

(EMILIANO nods)

EMILIANO

He told me everything that I would need to begin my investigation. My mind has already begun, like a locomotive that has been filled with the finest coal it will not stop until it reaches it's destination.

MR. THOMPSON

Appreciate that. Sounds like it shouldn't take long for you two to sort this out.

(EMILIANO glances at JACK then back at MR. THOMPSON and gives a short laugh)

EMILIANO

But of course. You have hired the best and someone who will do his best.

(JACK blows out a puff of smoke. EMILIANO lets out another short laugh. MR. THOMPSON smiles)

MR. THOMPSON

You too try to enjoy yourselves while you work. Let me know if you need anything.

(MR. THOMPSON gives them a nod and goes back to talking to CAPTAIN JONES, a man in a police uniform. JACK watches him)

leave and takes a drag on his cigarette. EMILIANO stops looking at JACK and stares at CAPTAIN JONES)

EMILIANO

I thought he requested that we did not involve the police in our investigation?

JACK

That's Captain Jones. He's over the precinct. Thompson bought him out years ago.

(EMILIANO grabs the papers from his jacket pocket, and starts to scan them)

JACK

He pulled Frank out of the water. Wrote the reports all himself.

(EMILIANO looks up from the papers at JACK, cocks his head and looks up for a moment, folds the papers and places them back in his jacket pocket)

EMILIANO

So, shaken by the death of his comrade he-

JACK

(Interrupting)

He hated Frank.

(JACK and EMILIANO watch CAPTAIN JONES laugh loudly while talking to NAILS, a man in a red suit, and take a big sip of his drink)

JACK

Fella he's talking to is Nails. Deals stolen art, has worked Thompson's books for years, and has been his lawyer for even longer.

(EMILIANO starts to pull the papers from his jacket again)

JACK (cont'd)

Frank's will was changed a week ago. He handled that.

(EMILIANO looks over at JACK. JACK takes a drag on his cigarette)

EMILIANO

I'm sorry, his name is Nails?

JACK

Yeah. He hated Frank too.

(JACK glances over at EMILIANO)

JACK (cont'd)

But what do I know. Since you're on this, guess there's nothing left for me to do.

(JACK walks away from EMILIANO, goes around a crowd of guests USL, observing them. EMILIANO watches JACK, and looks back and forth and writing notes rapidly in a little leather notebook. JACK sees someone and looks away. EMILIANO notices. JACK walks up to the bar CSR with EMILIANO behind him)

JACK

Jack Daniels. Neat.

(BARTENDER looks over at EMILIANO. EMILIANO smiles and sidles up next to JACK)

EMILIANO

I would be delighted if you could make me an Aperol spritz. Is that something you think could do?

(BARTENDER nods. EMILIANO bows his head down. The bartender starts to make their drinks. JACK looks back out at the crowd. Music starts to play, and EMILIANO watches JACK's face)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

You don't seem to be enjoying the atmosphere here I take it?

JACK

Not particularly, no.

EMILIANO

It looks to be shaping up to be a delightful dinner party.

(EMILIANO sighs and looks out at the crowd)

EMILIANO

It will be a shame when someone is inevitably murdered.

(EMILIANO grins and looks back at JACK. JACK doesn't look back)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

So, you prefer to be miserable then?

(JACK grabs his drink from the bartender just as he finishes pouring. He looks back and gives one swift nod)

JACK

Thanks pal.

(JACK starts to walk away towards DSL, EMILIANO grabs his drink, leaves several bills with it, and follows after him)

JACK (cont'd)

I understand you enjoy being irritating, but I really just wanna enjoy my drink in silence.

(EMILIANO nods and puts up his hand)

EMILIANO

I will let you enjoy your drink Mr. Hatchett. But I suspect it is not just my commentary that is vexing you in such a way.

(JACK stares out at the guests, and sees MR. THOMPSON staring at ROSY ROSALINE from across the room)

EMILIANO

You suspect something is afoot here?

(JACK takes a sip from his drink. JACK grimaces)

JACK

Somethings definitely screwy here.

EMILIANO

I concur, though I don't-

(JACK finishes his drink in one gulp, hands it to EMILIANO and walks towards ROSY ROSALINE, who is adjusting her diamond necklace DSL. EMILIANO walks after him)

JACK

Hey doll. Got a few questions.

ROSY

I could have a few answers.

(EMILIANO approaches the two of them, he bows in front of ROSY)

EMILIANO

Good evenin' madame. I do not believe we have had the pleasure of meeting as of yet.

(ROSY smiles and looks EMILIANO over)

ROSY

Pleasure's all mine. Who's this fella Jackie?

JACK

Guy I'm workin' with.

EMILIANO

My name is Emiliano De Leon, though friends just call me Emiliano.

ROSY

I hope we can be friends Mr. De Leon.

(ROSY lights a cigarette and stares at the two men. She flags down a waiter who comes up quickly)

ROSY (cont'd)

I'd love a Cosmo darling. Think you can manage it?

(The waiter nods and runs BSR)

JACK

What do you know about Frank getting offed?

ROSY

Missed you Jackie. It's been too long.

(EMILIANO looks over at JACK, JACK looks back and then looks back to ROSY)

JACK

Yeah.

(ROSY smiles and adjusts her necklace)

ROSY

Oh I think I heard something about that in the paper. Just dreadful. He really was a gem. He'll be missed.

(ROSY pouts her lip out for a second. The waiter returns with a cosmopolitan that she starts to sip at)

JACK

Frank was real swell wasn't he? But you told everybody ya hated him.

(ROSY places her free hand on his chest)

ROSY

Me? Never. I love the Thompson boys.

(ROSY takes a long sip of her drink. JACK gets closer)

JACK

You told Goldy. He hated Frank, and you told him you wished he'd dropped dead someday. Told a lot people that.

(ROSY shakes her head, and hands her drink to EMILIANO who is struggling to balance all three. ROSY grins)

ROSY

Jackie you got me confused with someone else. If I wanted to get rid of Frank I would've. And if this fella was so dreadful, wouldn't the world be a better place if he wasn't in it?

(EMILIANO hands the glasses off to a passing waiter, and raises a hand)

EMILIANO

Madame, may I ask you something?

(ROSY and JACK turn to look at EMILIANO)

ROSY

Of course.

EMILIANO

Where did you get your necklace?

(JACK stares at EMILIANO, cocks his head, and turns back to look at ROSY)

JACK

Yeah, doll where'd ya get it?

(ROSY lifts up the necklace off her neck with a finger)

ROSY

Oh this old thing? Who knows.

(ROSY lets go of the necklace)

JACK

That's pretty interestin', considering-

EMILIANO

(Interrupting)

It must be new, I've seen you changed the way it has lain around your neck many times. Like a noose tightening round the accused, you have fought against your necklace, why? You may not know how you wish to wear it yet, and it has made you feel increasingly uncomfortable, yes? Or is it guilt?

(ROSY looks down at necklace, stops smiling, and looks back at EMILIANO)

ROSY

Ok, I did pick it up somewhat recently, that a crime? Shouldn't I be allowed to change the length of it whenever I please. And why would I feel guilty? I haven't done anything.

(JACK looks over at EMILIANO, rubs his forehead, and EMILIANO nods at ROSY)

EMILIANO

You are right, and I apologize if I have upset you in anyway. I assure you that is was not my intention in the slightest sense. I hope you have a wonderful evening.

(EMILIANO turns to start and walk away towards DSR. He stops and spins around)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

Out of curiosity, how much was this wonderful necklace?

(ROSY takes a drag on her cigarette)

ROSY

Couple thousand. Doubt that too?

(EMILIANO smiles)

EMILIANO

No, I believe you. It is quite an exquisite necklace.

(EMILIANO studies the necklace and looks back at ROSY)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

It is a shame that two of it's diamonds have been replaced by cheap imitations is it not?

(ROSY stops smiling and glances over at JACK. EMILIANO motions over at JACK)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

Fortunately, we know where the other actual diamonds are. Or where they were, with Frank, they kept him company while he drifted into the sea after he was struck down by your hand!

ROSY

Now wait a minute I don't think-

(JACK holds up a hand)

JACK

(Interrupting)

Shove it.

(EMILIANO begins to pace back and forth, talking with his hands)

EMILIANO

You would have had the diamonds replaced yourself, but you needed this necklace tonight. Here. At this ball? Why?

(EMILIANO stops walking. He looks at the floor for a moment, then up at ROSY)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

Yes, to make someone jealous? Would it be the host, Mr. Thompson? I have seen the way he stares at you. Another past lover perhaps? But no, it was for the late Mr. Frank's wife! She had no idea you were sleeping with her husband and when she found out she insulted you and your character.

(EMILIANO starts to pace again, JACK is watching him)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

Frank took the side of his wife when you last met with him, and in a fit of rage you set out to destroy him. You stole his necklace, killed him, and came here to this event to hopefully embarrass his cruel wife with you wearing her dead husband's anniversary gift to her as the final nail in the coffin for your revenge!

(ROSY buries her head in her hands and starts to cry. JACK glances over at EMILIANO)

JACK

Alright.

(EMILIANO nods)

EMILIANO

She is quite possibly the most suspicious women I have met or will ever meet.

(ROSY lifts her head from her hands and wipes the tears from her eyes)

ROSY

I didn't kill him!

(EMILIANO and JACK both turn to face ROSY)

ROSY (cont'd)

He said we were going to get married and run away together! He changed his mind at the last minute and decided he wanted to break things off and asked for the necklace he'd given me back. He said his wife had worn it a few times when he had it laying around the house and he had made it seem like it was a gift to her. I wouldn't let him take it back, we yanked it back and forth, the necklace went flying and when I picked it up I didn't realize the diamonds that had come out until I got home. I didn't look back. And I didn't try to show off the necklace to her! I was given this letter the other day-

(ROSY yanks a folded letter from her purse and holds it up in the air)

ROSY (cont'd)

He must've wrote it right after we fought. Mr. Thompson said his wife found it. He apologized for fighting and said he was gonna finally leave her for me. He told me to keep the necklace. I wore it for him!

(ROSY slams the crumpled letter onto EMILIANO's chest, goes back to crying and runs off BSL. JACK rubs his face. EMILIANO tugs at his mustache. JACK grabs the letter from EMILIANO and scans it)

EMILIANO

Curious.

JACK

Yeah. Specially, since Frank didn't write this.

(EMILIANO glances over at JACK and then looks at the letter.
JACK points at the letter)

JACK (cont'd)

Looks like he wrote it, whoever did this was good. Problem is, everything's spelled right.

(EMILIANO points at the letter)

EMILIANO

Many people have read this letter. It has been folded several ways that are inconsistent with each other.

(JACK looks at the letter. EMILIANO looks over at the crowd. He points someone out at USR)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

Would that be Mrs. Frank?

(JACK nods)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

I'd like to ask her some questions.

(EMILIANO starts to walk in her direction USR, JACK follows after him)

JACK

Hang on.

(EMILIANO turns back and faces JACK)

JACK (cont'd)

Let's talk.

(JACK jerks his hand behind him with his thumb up. EMILIANO nods and the two exit BSR. The curtain comes down. EMILIANO and JACK enter from BSL in front of the curtain, walk to DCS and then face each other. JACK lights a cigarette)

EMILIANO

Look while I appreciate the thought behind some of your methods, I think it's time for you to take a step back.

(JACK places the cigarette in his mouth, and stares at Emiliano)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

I'm the reason why you're here.

(JACK chuckles, stares up at the ceiling, and then back at Emiliano)

JACK

That right?

EMILIANO

It would seem so.

JACK

I let you try whatever you were tryin' to do, and it went about as well as I imagined it would. Next time, stick to the script. My method might not be perfect but it sells. I was interrogating her just fine.

(EMILIANO shakes his head and chuckles)

EMILIANO

The bank and I beg to differ. You'll completely ruin this or worse, manage to get us both fired.

JACK

Right, 'cause you've done such a bang-up job so far.

EMILIANO

That had nothing to do with my abilities.

(JACK shakes his head, smirks, and stares down EMILIANO)

JACK

I say my lines just fine.

(JACK blows out a long puff of smoke)

JACK (cont'd)

You may know your way around Shakespeare, but when it comes to dealin' with real productions, real stakes, you're as useful as a screen door on a submarine.

(EMILIANO chuckles, shakes his head, and looks away)

EMILIANO

You may swagger about, proud of your falsetto ruggedness and cheap whiskey but I know what you really are.

(JACK chuckles and lets out another puff of smoke)

JACK

No kiddin'. What might that be?

(EMILIANO turns back and faces Jack, his smile is gone)

EMILIANO

A wolf. In a sheep dog's uniform. Playing your part, skirting dangerously close, perhaps from time to time even past the line that separates the art of what we do to playing to, forgive my expression, the nosebleeds.

(JACK scoffs, shaking his head, and turns to face EMILIANO. He lets out a small puff of smoke)

JACK

You don't know the first thing about me. I've been wearin' this coat proudly for years. I never had to take a gig because I was so desperate nobody from Goldwyn to RKO would hire me. Pullin' crap like you just did.

(EMILIANO rolls his eyes, JACK stares him down)

JACK (cont'd)

I'll be damned if I let some highfalutin know-it-all like you come waltzin' in and act like you own the place. Act like you can handle what I can.

(EMILIANO narrows his eyes, and cracks a small smile)

EMILIANO

I would not talk to me in such a cavalier way if you knew the things I had to do to get here. To become a household name. I have unraveled mysteries and wowed the masses in ways you couldn't even dream of. And if I am not mistaken, I was brought in to help you and not the other way around.

(JACK steps forward)

JACK

Wanna prove yourself? Put your money where your mouth is. Don't change things that don't need to be changed. Do your job, and I'll do mine.

(EMILIANO smiles and meets JACK's gaze)

EMILIANO

Whatever you say.

(JACK nods, and they both turn and exit BSR)

FADE OUT

INT. JACK HATCHETT'S OFFICE — NIGHT

The room is dimly lit by a single desk lamp. Jack sits behind his desk, holding a glass of whiskey in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

NOIR NARRATOR

(Offscreen)

Jack Hatchett, a man with a past as murky as the bottom of a whiskey bottle. He's seen it all, and it's left its mark.

Jack stares at a black-and-white photograph on his desk. It's a picture of him and a woman, both smiling.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

But there's one thing he can't seem to shake loose. Memories of her.

Jack takes a long drag from his cigarette. Someone knocks on the door.

JACK

Come in.

The door creaks open, and SHADOWY FIGURE, an unknown female, steps into the room.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

And just when he thought he could leave it all behind, trouble comes knocking.

The figure approaches Jack's desk, their features obscured by the shadows.

SHADOWY FIGURE

I need your help.

Jack leans back in his chair, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

JACK

Don't we all.

SHADOWY FIGURE

It's Frank. He's been murdered.

Jack cocks his head to the side, straightens it, and takes a drag on his cigarette.

JACK

Why come to me?

The figure hesitates, then reaches into their coat pocket and pulls out a crumpled photograph, handing it to Jack.

SHADOWY FIGURE

Because we know that you're the best there is. And because of who we suspect did it. A real high profile number.

Jack stares at the crumbled photograph and takes a sip of his drink.

JACK

But why him?

SHADOWY FIGURE

Made several unsolicited calls to Thompson's family. His detective work dried up and wanted to get into bootlegging.

JACK

He's not the type.

SHADOWY FIGURE

That's what we said. Told us that have the cases he'd solved he was involved in at some point. He'd find a sucker and pin it on them.

Jack takes a drag on his cigarette.

JACK

So why off Frank?

SHADOWY FIGURE

Told the family he'd do something like that if they wouldn't work with them. Told them, he'd make it look like one of them did it.

Jack blows out a puff of cigarette smoke.

JACK

Alright. Bring what you have on him over here.

The figure nods and begins to exit the office.

SHADOWY FIGURE

Thanks, Jackie. You won't regret it.

As the figure leaves, JACK takes another sip of whiskey, his eyes focused on the photograph of EMILIANO in his hand.

NOIR NARRATOR

(OFF SCREEN)

Jack Hatchett, hot on the trail of another mystery, one that he suspects might be far more than he's ever bargained with.

Jack snaps his fingers and the figure pauses in the doorway. JACK looks up at the figure.

JACK

I'm going to need you to hire him.

FADE OUT.

ACT I
SCENE VII

Setting: Mansion Library. Evening. There are several bookcases located at USC and a door at DSL.

At rise: BUTLER, MAID, CAPTAIN JONES, NAILS, and ROSY ROSALINE are having quiet conversations amongst each other. JACK and EMILIANO enter from DSL, pushing open a door and leaving it ajar. They watch Mrs. Frank take a sip of her cocktail, place it on a table, and walk over to where BUTLER is standing. JACK surveys the room, pulls out a cigarette, and lights it. EMILIANO takes a moment to comb his hair back into place, and to stroke his mustache. JACK glances at EMILIANO.

JACK

You want to bump gums with the bim before I do?

(EMILIANO jerks his head over at JACK)

EMILIANO

I beg your pardon?

(JACK blows out a puff of smoke and takes another drag on his cigarette)

JACK

You want to talk to her before or after me?

(EMILIANO looks over at MRS. FRANK)

EMILIANO

I see.

(EMILIANO looks back at JACK and sighs)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

Your turns of phrase are nearly indecipherable. Why must you feel you should converse in such a manner if you can speak freely without your turns of phrase?

(JACK lets out a long and slow blow of smoke. EMILIANO rolls his eyes and looks back at MRS. FRANK)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

You're free to tag along if you wish to further educate yourself.

(JACK snorts and EMILIANO walks towards MRS. FRANK. When EMILIANO is nearly there the lights go out)

BLACK OUT

(There is the sound a woman's scream, people yelling, and shoes scuffling)

FADE IN

(The lights turn back on, and everyone is spread across the stage. Everyone is looking around, except JACK who hasn't moved and is staring at MRS. FRANK'S body lying sprawled out on the ground, a knife sticking out of her back. EMILIANO is standing above her body, he reaches down and starts to put two of his fingers on Mrs. Frank's neck but stops. EMILIANO suddenly stands up and looks around the room)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

There has been...

(EMILIANO glances over at JACK and then back around the room)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

A murder!

(The guests look back and forth at each other. EMILIANO walks to the room's door, which is now closed, and grabs the handle and glances back at the guests. JACK walks over to Mrs. Frank and looks at her body)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

None of you will be allowed to leave. Killer beware, your time has come. The train has arrived in the station and you have punched not only this woman's ticket but your own! This door will be locked until I determine...

(EMILIANO jiggles the door handle, attempts to open the door, and shakes the door a few times. EMILIANO cocks his head to the side, stares at the door for a moment, and turns to face the group, and walks to CS. EMILIANO starts to pace)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

It appears to have already been locked. From the inside. One of you does not want someone to leave for reasons that will only be hidden from me for a matter of time.

(EMILIANO stops pacing and stares at the group. JACK continues to smoke and stare at EMILIANO)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

Your secrets. They do not belong to you anymore. They belong to me. They will be extracted, ripped from you in the same manner that this woman's breath was ripped from her chest.

(EMILIANO looks across the group and points at CAPTAIN JONES)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

I will begin my questioning with you. The rest of you will wait.

CAPTAIN JONES

Why are ya lookin' at me? What did I do?

EMILIANO

That is the question, is it not?

(EMILIANO steps away from CAPTAIN JONES and walks over to JACK)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

May I have another word?

(JACK nods and the two walk DSC)

EMILIANO

Are you curious as to who wrote-

JACK
(Interrupting)

Yeah.

(EMILIANO nods, looks back at the group that has assembled, and then looks back at JACK. JACK lets out a puff of smoke)

EMILIANO

Would you mind informing Mr. Thompson of Mrs. Frank's untimely demise? And bring him here?

(JACK nods, glances over at the door, and then back at EMILIANO)

JACK

I'll lock it on my way out.

(JACK walks to the door, pushes it open, and locks it from the other side before disappearing backstage. EMILIANO walks back up to the guests at CS. CAPTAIN Jones points at the door)

CAPTAIN JONES

It was never locked!

(EMILIANO nods and strokes his mustache)

EMILIANO

This is true. But now the door is locked, and we are trapped in this library together until the truth writes its itself on the pages of justice's ledger!

NAILS

What?

(EMILIANO begins to pace back and forth)

EMILIANO (cont'd)

It is quite interesting Captain that you were the first to point out that it was merely a ruse that this room was locked with no way of escape. Why in a group of so many others would you be the individual who raises the first question? Who wishes to escape so badly that he would do anything to leave and be rid of any guilt he may be holding deep in the recesses of his heart?

(CAPTAIN JONES groans and rubs his face with his hands)

FADE OUT

INT. BAKERY - DAY

Emiliano De Leon sits at a table in a cafe near the window, sipping a cup of tea and looking at the ornately decorated pastries in the display cases.

GENIUS NARRATOR

(Offscreen)

Emiliano De Leon, a master detective with a mind sharper than the finest blade, finds himself amidst, the comforting aroma of baked goods, but his mind, a steel trap, is troubled.

An UNKNOWN MAN, wearing a trench coat and fedora, approaches Emiliano's table quickly.

UNKNOWN MAN

Mr. De Leon, I'm relieved you could make it.

Emiliano nods, gesturing for Unknown Man to take a seat.

EMILIANO

Please, have a seat.

Unknown Man sits down. Emiliano looks over at the pastries again, and then raises a hand. A waiter quickly appears beside him.

EMILIANO

I would like one of those delightful little pink religieuses if it wouldn't cause you any trouble.

The waiter nods and quickly walks away. Emiliano stares at Unknown Man.

EMILIANO

So why did you wish to meet in such a manner as this?

Unknown Man nods, reaches into a manilla folder and retrieves several documents.

UNKNOWN MAN

We discovered this with Frank's belongings. Apparently, he was involved with several business dealings that went south. Several were with one person.

Emiliano scans the papers. The waiter re-appears with Emiliano's pastry. Emiliano takes it, puts down the papers, nods at the waiter, and starts to eat the pastry with a small fork.

EMILIANO

It would appear he owed a lot of people quite a lot of money. Why are you calling into question the character of this one individual?

Unknown Man looks around the bakery and back at Emiliano. He lowers his voice.

UNKNOWN MAN

Frank had grown increasingly paranoid in the days before his death. He was convinced that he was being followed, that his every move was being watched. Told a lot of people he only had a few days left.

Emiliano takes a bit of the pastry, puts it in his mouth, and puts down his fork.

EMILIANO

And you believe this pursuer to be the same man?

Unknown Man nods.

UNKNOWN MAN

I think Frank found out something about this man, something he didn't care for anyone else to find out. Looks like he blackmailed Frank for years until Frank decided he was gonna come clean.

Unknown Man pulls out a photograph, and hands it to Emiliano. Emiliano stares at the picture.

UNKNOWN MAN

Got a picture of Frank an hour before his death, and you can see that he's being followed by the same man.

Emiliano is staring at a picture of Frank with Jack Hatchett in the distance behind him.

EMILIANO

Very well. I shall endeavor to unravel the tangled web surrounding Frank's demise.

UNKNOWN MAN

Thank you, Mr. De Leon. Your reputation precedes you, and I have every confidence in your abilities. I must warn you though, this person is a detective like you. And he's tough.

Emiliano smiles.

EMILIANO

Rest assured. I shall leave no stone unturned in pursuit of the truth. Whether he be a mind as sharp as my own, though I doubt it, he won't be able to conceal what he desperately wishes to for too long.

GENIUS NARRATOR

(Offscreen)

Emiliano De Leon, the embodiment of intellect and refinement, prepares to embark on what will soon be known as his most challenging case yet.

Emiliano rises from his seat.

EMILIANO

I will need to study him, as a lion waits in the tall grass to catch his prey. To find out his secrets and expose him for the treacherous man he surely is.

Emiliano grabs a napkin off the table and dabs his mouth.

EMILIANO

For me to conduct this investigation properly, your family will need to hire him to solve this case like you would any other. I will lie in wait until I find what I am looking for to incriminate and entrap.

The Unknown Man nods.

UNKNOWN MAN

We can do that.

Emiliano puts down the napkin and smiles.

EMILIANO

Good. I will send you instructions that I want you to follow precisely.

Emiliano starts to exit the bakery, then turns and faces the Unknown Man.

EMILIANO

The game is afoot. And I do believe the bill will be on you.

FADE OUT

ACT I
SCENE IX

Setting: Mansion Office. Evening. Centerstage there is a desk.

At rise: JACK enters from BSL and walks to MR. THOMPSON, who is seated at the desk CS.

JACK

Got a problem. Mrs. Frank is dead.

(MR. THOMPSON's eyebrows shoot up, JACK lights a cigarette)

MR. THOMPSON

That's terrible news. What happened?

(JACK takes a drag on his cigarette)

JACK

Knife in the back.

(MR. THOMPSON stands up, and stares at JACK)

MR. THOMPSON

What are you doing about it? Why are you here? Where's Emiliano?

JACK

He's handling it. Probably figured it out by now.

(JACK lets out a puff of smoke)

JACK (cont'd)

Don't seem too shook up about it.

(MR. THOMPSON cocks his head to the side)

MR. THOMPSON

What do you mean?

(JACK takes a drag on his cigarette and then lets out a puff of smoke)

JACK

Where'd Rosy get that letter?

MR. THOMPSON

I found it, at-

JACK

(Interrupting)

No ya didn't. I'm gonna ask you again.

(JACK lets out another puff of smoke)

JACK (cont'd)

For your finger's sake, tell me where'd you get that letter. And why Mrs. Frank is now dead.

(MR. THOMPSON takes a step back)

MR. THOMPSON

I swear on my brother's grave I had nothin' to do with it. You gotta believe me. You should be asking Emiliano.

(JACK blows out a long puff of his cigarette and then tosses it aside)

JACK

I will.

(MR. THOMPSON takes a step back)

MR. THOMPSON

So, what, you just gonna rough me up?

(JACK starts walks towards MR. THOMPSON)

JACK

Probably.

(MR. THOMPSON attempts to punch JACK, but JACK grabs his hand and twists it. MR. THOMPSON yells. JACK grabs MR. THOMPSON by the collar of his suit jacket, and JACK slaps him twice. MR. THOMPSON struggles, but JACK holds him tight)

JACK (cont'd)

Time to take a little walk.

(MR. THOMPSON stumbles while JACK drags him offstage to BSR)

ACT I
SCENE X

Setting: Mansion Library. Evening. There are several bookcases located at USC and a door at DSL.

At rise: JACK kicks open the door DSL dragging MR. THOMPSON into the room. The other guests turn to watch, a mix of shock and confusion on their faces.

JACK

Alright, Thompson, spill.

(MR. THOMPSON stumbles forward, regaining his footing. He straightens his suit, attempting to regain his composure. EMILIANO removes a glove from ROSY ROSALINE'S hand and walks up to MR. THOMPSON)

MR. THOMPSON

Just hold on a minute-

(EMILIANO smacks the glove back and forth on MR. THOMPSON'S face)

EMILIANO

We would like to know who instructed Ms. Rosy to wear this necklace tonight.

(MR. THOMPSON glances at the other guests, then back at JACK)

MR. THOMPSON

I don't know what you two are talking about. I am paying the two of you to solve-

(JACK steps forward and MR. THOMPSON stops talking. MR. THOMPSON stares at JACK and then EMILIANO)

MR. THOMPSON (cont'd)

Alright look. I did give her the letter, and Mrs. Frank never saw it.

EMILIANO

But yet you showed it around? Let it exchange hands, let it fold upon itself like the lies who have told on top of each other. Each more ridiculous than the last. A house of cards that-

MR. THOMPSON

(Interrupting)

What? No. I got it like that. I didn't give it to Mrs. Frank because I figured it would break her heart to find it out. It was the help that found it and gave it to me. If you want to start pointing fingers, I'd start with them.

JACK

What about Rosy?

MR. THOMPSON

What about her? Frank took her from me and when that happened, she and him were both dead to me.

(JACK takes a drag on his cigarette)

JACK

So you bumped off Frank and tried to pin it on Rosy.

(EMILIANO glances at JACK and MR. THOMPSON)

EMILIANO

It would appear so. He has a motive.

MR. THOMPSON

I'd never kill Frank! I may have hated his guts from time to time but he was blood.

JACK

Hasn't stopped you before.

MR. THOMPSON

I know how it looks but I didn't do it. If you should be asking anyone questions I'd start with-

BLACKOUT

(The sound of screaming and yelling is heard. Several footsteps are heard scrambling around. Mr. Thompson yells. There is silence for a moment. The lights go up. MR. THOMPSON is lying on the ground with a knife in his chest. EMILIANO walks up to the body with JACK)

EMILIANO

He's dead. That is quite unfortunate.

JACK

Yeah. No kiddin.

(EMILIANO stares at JACK as he pulls out another cigarette, lights it, and takes a drag on it)

EMILIANO

Why do you feel the need to have your character be constantly smoking?

(JACK blows a puff of smoke at EMILIANO)

JACK

Here's a thinker, why do you care?

EMILIANO

And that would be it. You do not care if what you produce is of value and you will not put forth a semblance of effort to command the room with your presence. There is no purpose behind them. It is pointless.

(JACK blows out another puff of smoke at EMILIANO)

JACK

So, I should be a narcissist and enjoy listening to myself yap as much as you do? That's your advice for me?

EMILIANO

I am merely attempting to help.

JACK

Really? Heard your agent was trying to get you off this but you couldn't.

(JACK takes a drag on his cigarette)

EMILIANO

It was a negotiation tactic. You couldn't begin to understand what true show business is. I was there when the rules of it were written for the likes of talented men and women monkeys like you dream of and worship but will never be.

JACK

I'm sure I wouldn't understand. And frankly, I don't care to. Just like all the other people you talked down to over the years. And how'd that all work out for ya? Didn't get a dime more, and you lost any remaining respect anyone has for you.

(EMILIANO walks up, yanks the cigarette out of JACK'S mouth, and tosses it. JACK cocks his head)

JACK

Really shouldn't have done that.

(JACK punches EMILIANO in the face. EMILIANO stumbles back several steps and launches himself onto JACK, knocking them both onto the ground. They both trade insults and blows at each other. MR. THOMPSON jumps up, knife still stuck to his chest, and runs over to the two detectives. The rest of the party guests are just behind him)

MR. THOMPSON

Hey, break it up guys!

(MR. THOMPSON attempts to drag EMILIANO away, DOCTOR HOOVER attempts to drag JACK away but they both break free and start at it again. The stage is flooded with tons of people wearing walkies, headsets, and microphone headsets that run on from backstage and begin to pull the two of them apart from each other. ASSISTANT DIRECTOR runs in from BSR waving their arms wildly)

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

(Yelling)

It's just a movie fellas, let's all just calm down!

BLACK OUT

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

A NEWS PRESENTER, well dressed, sits behind a desk in a brightly lit studio with a screen on the wall behind them with the words BLOT OUT on the screen.

NEWS PRESENTER

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Today marks the 30th anniversary of the infamously troubled production of the film BLOT OUT.

The presenter stands up and walks over to another set as they continue to talk.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

BLOT OUT is a detective film that's creation has fascinated audiences and critics alike with its tumultuous journey to the silver screen.

The presenter stops in front of a large blank screen that takes up the entire wall.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

At the heart of the issues that plagued the production were two iconic actors. The role of Private Eye Jack Hatchett was portrayed by the legendary Hollywood actor, Maxwell Steel.

The screen shows a picture of Maxwell Steel at a red carpet, wearing a tuxedo, and posing with a gun.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

Known for his tough demeanor and success in portraying noir characters, Steel was a veteran of the industry with a reputation for professionalism. He got his start in movie-making building sets and when he was told by a producer that he had a movie-star look he was a star in no time. He used his success to start making films as star vehicles for himself, even getting an Oscar nomination for Ash Alley, which he starred in and helped produce.

The screen shows a noir movie poster of Ash Alley.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

However, in the years leading up to Blot Out's production, the studio had a series of flops starting with The Maltese Pigeon and ending with Triple Indemnity, causing them to lose millions of dollars.

The screen shows movie posters for The Maltese Pigeon and Triple Indemnity next to each other. They look visually identical to the posters for The Maltese Falcon and Double Indemnity.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

They attempted to remarket Maxwell as a comedy-musical man, and due to his contractual obligations he was forced to appear in what it considered to be the worst film of his career, Swing Your Gal.

CUT TO:

INT. MOVIE STUDIO - DAY

MAXWELL, wearing suspenders and plaid pants, stands next to several actors in straw hats, loose fitting shirts, and baggy pants. Behind them is a façade of a barn.

MAXWELL

(Monotone)

So what do you boys reckon? Think we can arrange a boxing bout between the toughest fellas in your town?

One of the actors takes off his straw hat and scratches his head.

ACTOR 1

Well gee wilikers mister, I don't know how the mayor will feel about this!

Another actor nods quickly.

ACTOR 2

Oh boy! If ol mayor Baker hears about this, he'll have a fit and a half I tell you what.

All the actors except Maxwell nod. Maxwell doesn't make eye contact with any of them.

MAXWELL

(Monotone)

Well forget about what Baker has to say. You could be livin' in high cotton if we put this shindig together.

ACTOR 1

You're plumb crazy to think you can stand up to Mr. Baker!

ACTOR 2

You haven't got the sense God gave a goose mister!

Another actor in the back pushes to the front.

ACTOR 3

Well you might be right. It might be plumb crazy but I reckon livin' in high cotton might just be nice for a change.

ACTOR 1

Oh boy, I always dreamed I could be livin' in high cotton. I wonder what kinda things we could buy.

Actor 3 pulls out a fiddle and starts to play. The rest of the actors, excluding Maxwell, start to do an elaborate dance number around Maxwell while he stands there not moving.

EVERYONE BUT MAXWELL

(Singing)

We'll be livin' high cotton, in the heart of the hills,
Where the moon shines bright, and the banjo thrills,
We'll keep on singin', and dancin' with glee,
We'll be livin' in high cotton soon enough, just you wait and see!

The actors continue to dance around Maxwell. Maxwell stares at the camera.

CUT TO:

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

News Presenter stands in front of a large blank screen that takes up the entire wall with the words BLOT OUT on the screen.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

The film was a flop, Maxwell reputation was nearly permanently sullied, and the studio decided they would try to make the best detective film they had ever produced with Maxwell as the lead. They went behind Maxwell's back to place their hopes in someone else to save them from financial ruin. Enter acclaimed actor, Reginald Sterling.

The screen shows a picture of Reginald Sterling wearing ornate robes, a crown, and singing.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

He was once hailed as the most talented character performer in the world, especially for his adaptations of Shakespeare. He was even awarded an Oscar for his nuanced performance in Even Better Expectations. He was sought after for years until his reputation for stealing scenes from his co-stars and repeatedly criticizing their performances forced him to start working behind the camera.

The screen now displays images of Sterling standing next to a camera talking to several people in soldier costumes.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

Sterling talents may have been better used behind the camera as each film he worked on was critically acclaimed. However, his notoriously critical personality showed up in his behind-the-scenes behavior as well.

CUT TO:

INT. CASTLE - NIGHT

REGINALD, well dressed, stands in a courtyard next to an actor in a Victorian-Era coat, surrounded by a film crew.

REGINALD

I see what you are attempting to accomplish with your performance, but you must remember that this is the last time you will be seeing your father. I want to be able to feel that heartbreak. You understand?

The actor nods.

ACTOR 1

Ok.

Reginald clasps his hands together.

REGINALD

Wonderful!

Reginald steps away from the actor and behind the camera.

REGINALD
(Shouting)

And...Action.

The actor stares at the camera, his eyes well up with tears.

ACTOR 1

I will.

REGINALD

Cut!

Reginald sighs and walks next to the actor. He smiles at the actor.

REGINALD

How do you think that was?

ACTOR 1

Sad?

Reginald nods.

REGINALD

I agree. It was sad. I've unfortunately seen more convincing tears from crocodiles.

The actor cocks his head.

ACTOR 1

What?

REGINALD

I see this is hard for you to do, so let me help a little. Say the line for me as if you are running late for the birth of your firstborn daughter.

ACTOR 1

Just say it?

Reginald sighs.

REGINALD

Yes, just say the line.

ACTOR 1

(Quickly)

I will!

REGINALD

Bit too urgent. Bit too much father in that. Let's see you do it as if you've arrested for a crime that you committed but all you did was steal a loaf of bread to feed your family, and you're attempting to convince the French officer that has caught you in the act to let you go.

The actor looks to the side, and then back at Reginald. The actor sighs. Tears well up in his eyes again.

ACTOR 1
(While Sobbing)

I will!

REGINALD
No. Too miserable. Too French. Do it again.

The actor nods.

ACTOR 1
(Loudly)

I will!

REGINALD
No. Again.

ACTOR 1
(With a smile)

I will.

REGINALD
Embarrassing. Again.

ACTOR 1
(Like a question)

I will?

Reginald smiles.

REGINALD
That's it!

The actor smiles.

ACTOR 1
Really?

Reginald stops smiling.

REGINALD

No. That was acting. Again.

The actor rolls his eyes and looks at Emiliano.

ACTOR 1

(Tired)

I will.

Reginald smiles.

REGINALD

That's it! That's it exactly! Just do that.

Reginald runs behind the camera.

REGINALD

Action!

The actor stares at the camera.

ACTOR 1

(Tired)

I will.

REGINALD

Cut!

Reginald steps back next to the actor.

REGINALD

No, unfortunately you lost it. That's not quite right.
Let's go again.

CUT TO:

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

A NEWS PRESENTER, well dressed, stands in front of a large blank screen that takes up the entire wall with the words BLOT OUT on the screen.

NEWS PRESENTER

Reginald would eventually become blacklisted from Hollywood with most actors having a clause in their contracts that they would refuse to work with him, as he would do no less than a hundred takes per shot. Sterling's transition from actor to writer director brought a wealth of experience to the troubled production of Blot Out, as he was tasked with both reprising an iconic role he played and rewriting the film's muddled script.

The screen now displays images of Reginald Sterling wearing glasses and looking at a script. The News Presenter sits down in one of the chairs. The screen displays the Blot Out logo once more.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

When he was hired on Sterling agreed to reprise the role of Emiliano De Leon, a character he had portrayed several times in his earlier acting career in acclaimed works such as The Beagle of the Baskervilles and Death on the Euphrates.

The screen shows movie posters for The Beagle of the Baskervilles and Death on the Euphrates next to each other. They look visually identical to the posters for The Hound of the Baskervilles and Death on the Nile.

NEWS PRESENTER CONT'D

The trouble between Steel and Sterling reportedly began during the film's rehearsals, as tensions ran high while they acted out scenes on the stage prior to when filming commenced. Due to their vastly different backgrounds, clashes between the two actors became increasingly frequent, as did with the rest of the crew and ensemble cast.

ACT I
SCENE XII

Setting: The projector cuts off and lights come up. We have returned to the live actors. Mansion Library. Evening. There are several bookcases located at USC and a door at DSL.

At rise: MR. THOMPSON is lying on the ground DSC with a knife in his chest. EMILIANO and JACK are standing with the party guests USR. EMILIANO walks up to the body with JACK.

EMILIANO

He's dead. That is quite unfortunate.

JACK

Yeah. No kiddin.

(EMILIANO stares at JACK as he pulls out another cigarette, lights it, and takes a drag on it. JACK grins at EMILIANO as he lets a puff of smoke out. EMILIANO sighs, looks down at the body and back up at the guests)

EMILIANO

It would appear that another has been ripped from their mortal coil. There is no way in, no way out, which would mean that our killer still remains with us. They are watching, and lying in wait. So I must ask, the true killer to reveal themselves. To be unshackled from their...

(EMILIANO looks over at JACK and then offstage)

EMILIANO

I don't feel like my character would say unshackled.

(JACK groans and rubs his face. Several people come on stage wearing headsets and walkies, including ASSISTANT DIRECTOR.)

JACK

Just say the line Sterling.

REGINALD

I would love to say it Maxwell, if it were something that my character would truly say. Emiliano, as established in his third feature film, is a man who is well read, well spoken, yes, but his refinement comes mostly from his relationship with his grandfather and-

MAXWELL

(Interrupting)

Of course it does.

REGINALD

His grandfather of course did serve time in a quite horrible penitentiary so it wouldn't seem appropriate for a man in his position to say-

MAXWELL

(Interrupting)

I'll be outside.

(MAXWELL looks over at ASSISTANT DIRECTOR)

MAXWELL

Let me know when he picks a word.

(REGINALD smiles and stares at MAXWELL and MAXWELL starts to walk DSL)

MAXWELL

(To himself)

I need a cigarette.

(MAXWELL leaves the stage, and begins to walk up the aisle)

REGINALD

(YELLING)

Maybe this time it'll finally be with purpose.

(REGINALD chuckles. MAXWELL looks back at REGINALD for a moment and then continues to go up the aisle)

MAXWELL

I'm gonna kill him.

BLACKOUT

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - DAY

A NEWS PRESENTER, well dressed, sits in front of a large blank screen that takes up the entire wall with the words BLOT OUT on the screen.

NEWS PRESENTER

As we continue with our special presentation, stay tuned for exclusive interviews we will be conducting with the cast of this production, as they shed light on the behind-the-scenes drama that plagued the production of BLOT OUT and what led to the most infamous event associated with the film, the murder that shook Hollywood to its core and left a bloody mark on its production.

BLACK OUT

END OF ACT ONE

PLAY CONCLUSION

In Act Two of *Blot Out*, the story shifts to the behind-the-scenes drama of the film production, exposing the tyrannical behavior of studio mogul Jim Parker. Tensions simmer

among the cast and crew, particularly with Maxwell, an actor ensnared in complacency, and Reginald, a talented yet haughty perfectionist. Amidst the chaos, documentary segments featuring older versions of Maxwell and Reginald provide glimpses into their tumultuous relationship, offering insights into their on-set disagreements. Maxwell recounts a bizarre incident where Reginald deliberately sabotaged his lines during a scene, leading to him repeatedly taking fake shots of whiskey and in turn gallons of sweet tea consumed. Though both actors hint at a mysterious murder on set, the details remain shrouded in secrecy.

As Act Three unfolds, the narrative of *Blot Out* delves deeper into the web of deception woven by Rosy Rosaline, the cunning mastermind behind the plot. Under her guidance, Frank has been masquerading as his deceased twin brother, Mr. Thompson, manipulating events to seize control of the bootlegging empire. Despite their differences, Emiliano and Jack begrudgingly join forces to unravel the case, recognizing the value of their complementary skills.

Amidst the escalating tension, the demise of Jim Parker casts a shadow over the production, sparking a search for answers among the cast and crew. With numerous suspects harboring grievances against Parker, Maxwell and Reginald form an unlikely alliance to uncover the truth behind his murder. Through their investigation, they unearth the simmering resentment of the film's ghostwriter, driven to seek retribution against those who have exploited his talents. His vendetta leads him to target Reginald for rewriting *Blot Out*, without due acknowledgment. Maxwell realizes this and saves Reginald, just in time.

As the investigation unravels, Maxwell discovers a newfound passion for filmmaking and after filming concludes embraces roles that defy the noir archetype. Conversely, Reginald

undergoes a humbling realization, acknowledging the detrimental impact of his arrogance and vows to treat his collaborators with respect.

The play reaches its conclusion with a heartfelt reunion between Maxwell and Reginald, within a documentary segment. Their genuine joy at reconnecting serves as a reminder of their change over the course of the story, bringing Blot Out to a close.

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