



Writ in the Margins Podcast

Created by the students in REN670: Dramaturgy in the Shakespeare and Performance graduate program at Mary Baldwin University

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Episode Guide

Season 2, Episode 2

Presumed Dead: Talkin' About Our Genre-ation

Hosts: Devlin Ford and Shawn Passero

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Episode Resources

Court Theatre, History of the genre

<https://www.courttheatre.org/about/blog/whodunnit-first-the-origins-of-the-murder-mystery/>

Masterclass, Elements of a murder mystery

<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/essential-elements-of-a-mystery-story>

Academic Dictionary, howcatchem definition

<https://en-academic.com/dic.nsf/enwiki/1180824>

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Hosts: [NAMES]

Psychology Today- 4 Reasons We Love Binging Crime Shows

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/school-thought/202102/4-reasons-we-love-binging-crime-shows>

Episode Transcript

In the Spanish golden age justice system, murdering your friend on the battlefield so you can try and marry his fiance is considered especially not good. On the streets of Portugal, the committed podcasters who talk about these savage crimes are members of a super awesome squad known as the Writ in the Margins Unit. These are their stories.

Shawn: Welcome (back) to Writ in the Margins. I'm Shawn Passero

Devlin: I'm Devlin Ford and today we will continue talking about Spanish Golden Age Comedy *Presumed Dead* by Ângela de Azevedo and how it is a perfect early modern "Whodunnit".

Dun Dun

Shawn: "What I love about this play is how it is framed as a murder mystery. The likes of which have become exceedingly popular in modern media. Whodunnit Plays like "The Play That Goes Wrong" or "The Mouse Trap" movies such as Knives Out and Shows like Law and Order, Law and Order SVU, Law and Order Criminal Intent, Law and Order Los Angeles, the list goes on. No, really it keeps going, Law and Order UK, trial by jury, true crime, and that's just the first page of google. With over 50 seasons of content, it's safe to say a modern audience enjoys a show about solving a crime.

Devlin: Do you like murder mysteries Shawn?

Shawn: I do love a murder mystery. I love something like the play that goes wrong. I love a good Sherlock. Comedy in dangerous situations is very enjoyable. What about you, Devlin?

Devlin: I really enjoy Knives Out, Only Murders in the Building. What I really love about both of those is that they feature amateurs who helped to solve the case. I love real unexcelled ordinary people just tripping over the solutions that to me is very entertaining. What is it that you think makes a good murder mystery?

Shawn: I think the suspense is what makes a good murder mystery the wait between when you find out there's a murder and you find out who did it and how they did it. The how they did it is also really really interesting

Devlin: You like like extravagant plots where like everything's really intricate

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Shawn: Everything's really intricate and by the time you get to the end and it's revealed what's happened you can look back and say oh, I should have realized that

Devlin: For me it's a lot about the vibe like it's always you know it's never just they find somebody dead and like a 711 it's maybe law and order but yeah like for like a good Agatha Christie murder mystery. It's never just you know, the guy who works down the street It's always somebody stately in a manner with like money. So the location is interesting to look at the sets are always beautiful costumes are fantastic. I love a a period placed murder mystery, just for the aesthetics.

Devlin: Before we dive in to the play let's talk a bit about where the murder mystery genre comes from. Scholars seem to agree that it was first created when Edgar Allen Poe published his story Murders in the Rue Morgue in 1844. Nearly 40 years later Sir Arthur Conan Doyle captured history's attention with the figure of Sherlock Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, both of which inspired Agatha Christie to write *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and create the beloved figure of Hercule Poirot. She also famously brought the genre to the stage in her play *The Mousetrap*. To be considered a true murder mystery a story has to involve the following attributes: it's tasked to start with a hook something that's big and attention getting. Sometimes this is the murderer sometimes this is just the setup of who all was in the room. That leads into having an atmospheric setting. Everything that starts with it was a dark and stormy night. There's obviously a crime and someone to solve it a detective or a sleuth, there has to be a villain. murder mysteries tend to have strong narrative momentum, which traditionally means fast paced story that builds an intensity towards the climax. Importantly, there are clues. The reader or watcher should be able to solve the mystery right alongside the detective. There's always foreshadowing hints towards something that will happen in the future. Red herrings which are false leads and always always a satisfying ending, no loose ends. So as the genre has evolved, so have the sub genres. As the genre has evolved so have the subgenres. There are way too many to examine in 20 minutes, but I feel like we have to talk about “the inverted detective story” also known as a “howcatchem.” In this version the story begins by showing us who the murderer is and how the crime was committed. One of the most famous examples is *Dial M for Murder*, the BBC radio drama produced in 1952, adapted for the stage, and then made into a film by Alfred Hitchcock in '54. At the beginning the villain tells us how he intends to kill his wife, and the rest of the plot revolves around our watching her figure out the plot and how to save herself. As you mentioned earlier, murder only grows in popularity from there. According to an article in *Psychology Today* this is because our brains are hardwired to love everything murder.

- It provides a safe adrenaline rush
- It engages our minds and imaginations much like a fairy tale does for children
- It allows us to access our evolved predator/prey drive safely- think hide and seek as children
- It allows us to interact with our “dark side” without judgment.

So, now that we have a little context on what a murder mystery is and why we find them fascinating, Let's look at *Presumed Dead* and how it slots into a genre that was created nearly 200 years after the play was written.

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Shawn: *Presumed Dead* is a play that lets the audience know all of the secrets before our main characters do. Lisarda is our detective. She has traveled from her home to find the murderer of her brother. Our murderer is Don Álvaro de Gamboa. Our Victim is Clarindo who is not actually dead. The clues for the murder come from knowing that Don Álvaro had the motive, means, and opportunity to kill Clarindo and move in on his girl Jacinta. Misdirection and twists- The misdirection comes from a plot hatched by Don Álvaro to have Lisarda confess to the murder of her brother Clarindo (who is of course not actually dead) The hook of this play is that from the beginning the audience knows who the murderer is, and by the beginning of the second act they know that the victim is alive. The safety in this adrenaline rush comes from the comedy of the play. The characters are all having a good time actively engaging with the audience. *Presumed Dead* is a play that lets the audience know all of the secrets before our main characters do.

Devlin: And we learn it all in the first act! Don Álvaro confesses out loud to us exactly what he did, why he did it, and how he got away with it!

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Shawn/Álvaro (Act I): I considered him not merely a comrade, but an intimate friend. Being so close (oh badly won friendship!), I can honestly say that I was his friend till death, since his life was sacrificed to my villainous betrayal. He'd often tell me of the favors that Jacinta, whom I adored, was granting him. It got to the point that, seeing him find affection where I only saw scorn from the beautiful Jacinta, my jealous anger became so enraged that when Clarindo was distracted, I avenged my jealousy with two strong knife thrusts that ended his life. News of his death spread through the entire military, without anyone knowing the name of the killer till now, because my cunning and skill were such that only Heaven and I know what happened in this despotic murder.

Dun Dun

Devlin: So let's unpack that a little bit. First, in a classic who Ketchum fashion the audience is made aware of who the murderer is by Don Álvaro's confession. And from this moment on, the audience gets to watch as Don Álvaro interacts with other characters in the play, and watch these other characters figure out that it was in fact, hee hee hee hee hee. From this moment on, the audience gets to watch as Don Álvaro interacts with other characters in the play, and enjoys watching those other characters figure out that he was in fact the murderer.

Shawn: The interesting thing is that Don Álvaro is the main and really only suspect in the play you sent to believes that it was absolutely Don Álvaro. And this artist shows up having some inkling that there is a man that could have murdered her brother. She knows that this person has done all varo but does not know where to find him. When she finally does find him, of course, she falls in love with him in normal fashion as you

Devlin: As you do. Look, it's hard out there.

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Devlin: You'd think that discovering that Clarindo didn't die after being stabbed twice in the stomach would Be an Act 5 surprise twist, but instead it is the first moment of act 2. The audience has barely digested who Everyone is, and how they're all connected to the dead man, and then the dead man walks onstage with no disguise, TALKING to his sister's servant.

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Shawn/Papagayo: Shadow, ghost, or illusion, don't pursue me; my soul is too scrawny for such grief. Why is the coward the guy who always finds himself having such encounters?

Devlin/Clarindo: Papagayo, of all my suffering, do you know what torments me the most?

Papagayo: What?

Clarindo: Being forgotten, my friend, by all my friends and relations, who don't remember to pray for me.

Papagayo: It's an old evil truth that when a man is dead and buried six feet under, others will forget him.

Clarindo: Surely they haven't considered me dead with any degree of certainty.

Papagayo: Why not? Everybody also knows what I believe, for there's news all over that you were killed in the Armada.

Clarindo: And is the name of the murderer known?

Papagayo: No, though the investigation of the case is moving forward.

Clarindo: Aside. (He'll be unveiled by my avenging hands.) And what has become of my father?

Papagayo: His wrath led him to flee this life.

Clarindo: He died? And my sister?

Papagayo: Aside. (Here's the point: if I tell him the truth, even though Lisarda did all she did because of him, it'll double his suffering when he finds out about her bold actions. Let's let the teensy little secret live by keeping quiet about it, since even dead guys can't be trusted with secrets.) Your sister became a monk.

Clarindo: A monk?

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Papagayo: I mean nun, 'cuz this stuff with monks and nuns is all the same to me, since they all wear habits and live in monasteries. Aside. (My God, there's no poet in the world who lies like I lie.)

Clarindo: He's gone, and his fear is what made him flee from me, since he believes I'm dead. Without a doubt everybody now considers my death an established fact, so to achieve my goal, I need only pretend that it's so. Papagayo's opinion of the matter encourages me to go forward, for when he saw me, he was terrified, so I kept on pretending and assumed the figure of a dead man. Strange things really do happen! Who would have thought that because a soldier with the same name died about that time, my death would be treated as fact and that I'd find Papagayo here? I won't go home without first avenging my honor and my jealousy. When my enemy's not paying attention and thinks he's safe because he believes I'm dead, he'll meet his own death.

Devlin: Wild stuff,

Shawn: Wild stuff. Somebody with the same name, died at the same time, it's a lot of 'suspend your disbelief'?

Devlin: But that's the case with any murder mystery, I think there's always the reason that the police can't just come full force in, there's always, you know, a chalet in the mountains that snowed in and no one can get there till morning, which gives the killer ample time to keep picking off new victims. So in that way, I feel like it's not so much of a stretch

Shawn: For when it's written, that functions very much like a modern day murder mystery, where you have to suspend your disbelief so that we can enjoy the show.

Devlin: What I also love about the figure of Claire endo is that he starts in this space of, I'm a ghost. I am a dead man, but I'm not hiding who I am. And then immediately puts on several disguises. Most of them women.

Shawn: Yes, he shows up as himself. And he's like, so what's going on? And Papagayo, was like, "I have no idea" and runs away And his responses. I'm scary because everyone thinks I'm dead. I guess I should be a lady in waiting. And go to my girlfriend's house and hang out for a while. And then while he's there, he's just started selling everybody things.

Devlin: It's a... it's a bold new look. I'll give him that much. So knowing what we know now about the play, I want to take a look at it and see if it actually fits the criteria to be an early modern murder mystery.

Dun Dun

Devlin: So first, we start with the hook. Why we care about this play.

Shawn: Jactina enters being pursued by an unknown man wielding a dagger and attempting to murder her, we then find out he's her father, enraged that she refuses to marry the suitor he chose. After calming down he tells her she

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can marry whoever she wants but he prefers she choose Don Álvaro. You think this is going to be a murder story and then maybe it is a love story, then it becomes a murder mystery and then it becomes a story about how the dead guy is alive and his sister has fallen in love with his murderer something akin to Basic Instinct

Devlin: An atmospheric setting

Shawn: The streets of Lisbon Portugal! It's colorful! It's vibrant! It's exciting!

Devlin: The Crime

Shawn: Clarindo's murder on the battlefield

Devlin: A Detective/Sleuth

Shawn: Lisarda who would be a very good detective had she not fallen in love with her suspect Devlin: A Villain -

Shawn: Don Álvaro

Devlin: Narrative momentum

Shawn: Each act builds the confusion

Devlin: Clues!

Shawn: Because this is a "howcatchem" we don't necessarily find out new information through clues, rather we enjoy watching others stumble their way through the plot relying on misinformation to solve the perceived crime.

Devlin: Foreshadowing

Shawn: ALL THE MONOLOGUES and all the asides

Devlin: Red herrings

Shawn: The plan to have Lisarda confess to the crime so that Don Álvaro can marry Jacinta

Devlin: A satisfying ending

Shawn: Everyone is alive and married! And no one was actually murdered.

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Devlin: Because it fits so much of the criteria established for a modern murder mystery, I think it's safe to say *Presumed Dead* is exactly that, just 200 years early to the party.

Shawn: Do we think there are any Shakespeare whodunnitst?

Devlin: Ooooo that's interesting.

Shawn: I think of something like *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, more of a "howcatchem." *Macbeth* is a short and *Hamlet* is a very, very long "howcatchem."

Devlin: Titus has elements but I don't think enough to be considered.

Shawn: And the history is we have assassinations and murderers, but we generally know who is responsible for them.

Devlin: Maybe Maybe *Richard the Third*. Maybe like he's got he's got enough of the intrigue surrounding. Am I a good guy? Am I a bad guy? The play is kind of a "howcatchem" for his character, but less in terms of like a whole structured story. And he definitely killed those kids

Shawn: Definitely killed those kids.

Devlin: Well on that note.

Shawn: Thank you so much for listening and be sure to check out our other episodes this season!

Devlin: Cut, fade to black, Executive producer dick wolf.

Dun Dun

Devlin: Silly.

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